

Classic Poetry Series

Makarand Paranjape

- poems -

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Makarand Paranjape (31 August 1960 -)

Makarand R. Paranjape is an Indian poet and professor at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi, India.

Early Life and Education

Makarand Paranjape was born in 1960 in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. He was educated at the Bishop Cotton Boys' School, Bangalore, followed by B.A. (Hons.) in English from St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi in 1980. Thereafter he joined the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, from where he first did M.A. in English in 1983, and subsequently his Ph.D in English in 1985 on the topic "Mysticism in Indian English Poetry".

Career

Makarand Paranjape has been teaching undergraduate/postgraduate students for almost 30 years. His teaching career has spanned the better part of the globe. A large part of this has been spent in USA and India, where he has lived and worked. He started his career in 1980, as Teaching Assistant at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He returned to India in 1986, joined the University of Hyderabad, first as Lecturer and then Reader. In 1994 he joined the Dept. of Humanities & Social Sciences, IIT Delhi as an Associate Professor. Since 1999, he has been a Professor of English at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Centre for English Studies. He has published over 120 Academic Papers in various refereed journals and edited books within the country and internationally. In addition, he is the author of several poems and short stories, over 200 essays, book reviews, and occasional pieces in academic and popular periodicals in India and abroad.

He was a columnist in Sunday Observer, Business Standard, The Pioneer, and Life Positive. He is chairperson of the Centre for English Studies, JNU, and is a member of the Board of Studies, the Academic Council of JNU, and the Vision Committee of JNU; the Coordinator for UGC Special Assistance Programme, in the Centre for English Studies, JNU from 2003 to 2008; the Principal Investigator of the Project on Indian Perspectives on Science and Spirituality, from 2006 to 2009. He is the General Editor of a series of reprints of rare and out of print Indian English titles published by the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi. He is the founding Trustee of Samvad India Foundation, a Delhi-based non-profit, public charitable trust, and also the founding editor of Evam: Forum on Indian Representations, an international bi-annual, multi-disciplinary journal on India. He was the chairperson for the Europe and South Asia region of Pan-Commonwealth panel of judges for the 2008 and 2009 Commonwealth Writers' Prize; he also served as the Indian host

judge for the 2010 Prize awarded in New Delhi.

Honours

Homi Bhabha Fellow for Literature, 1991–1993
Visiting Professor, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1996.
Shastri Indo-Canadian Research Fellow, University of Calgary, Canada, Summer 2000. Visiting Professor, Ball State University, Indiana, USA, Fall 2001.
IFUSS Fellow, University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA, Summer 2002.
Mellon Fellow, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Summer 2003 and Summer 2004.
Coordinator, UGC Special Assistance Programme, 2003 onwards
Joint-Coordinator, China-India inter-cultural dialogue, 2004–2005
GPSS research award, 2005–2006
Australia India Council Fellow, 2005–2006
GPSS Major Award 2006-2009
Chair of the Jury for South Asia and Europe of the Commonwealth Writers Prize, 2007-2009.
Visiting Professor, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, April–October 2009
Shivdasani Visiting Fellow, Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, University of Oxford, Michaelmas Term, 2009 (October–December)
ICCR Chair in Indian Studies, National University of Singapore, August 2010 onwards

Works:

Criticism

Mysticism in Indian English Poetry. Delhi: B.R.Publishers, 1988.
Decolonization and Development: Hind Svaraj Revisited. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993.
Nativism: Essays in Literary Criticism. Ed. Sahitya Akademi, 1997
Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2000.
In Diaspora: Theories, Histories, Texts. Ed. New Delhi: Indialog, 2001
Saundarya: The Perception and Practice of Beauty in India, Ed. with Harsha V. Sabda, 2004
Text and Interpretation in Indian Thought. Ed., with Santosh Sareen. New Delhi: Mantra Books, 2004.
English Studies: Indian Perspectives. Ed., with Amit Sarwal and Aneeta Rajendran. Mantra Books, 2006.
Another Canon: Indian Texts and Traditions in English. London: Anthem Books, 2009; New Delhi: Anthem Books, 2010 (paperback).
Altered Destinations: Self, Society, and Nation in India. London: Anthem Books, 2009. New Delhi: Anthem Books, 2010 (paperback).
Indian English and Vernacular India: Texts and Contexts. New Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2010. Ed., with GJV Prasad.
Bollywood in Australia: Transnationalism and Culture. Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2010. Ed., with Andrew Hassam.

Poetry

The Serene Flame. Delhi: Rupa & Co, India 1991.
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Used Book. New Delhi: Indialog Publications, New Delhi 2001.
Partial Disclosure. New Delhi: Mantra Books, India 2005.
Confluence. New Delhi: Samvad India, India 2007.

Fiction

This Time I Promise It'll Be Different: Short Stories. New Delhi: UBS Publishers, 1994.
The Narrator: A Novel. New Delhi: Rupa, 1995.

Edited Books

Indian Poetry in English. Madras: Macmillan, 1993.
Sarojini Naidu: Selected Poetry and Prose. Delhi: HarperCollins India, 1993;
2nd. rev. ed., New Delhi: Rupa, 2010.
An Anthology of New Indian English Poetry. Delhi: Rupa, 1994.
Sarojini Naidu: Selected Letters. Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996.
The Spirit's Manifest Home: The Story of Sri Aurobindo Ashram-Delhi Branch.
New Delhi: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997.
The Best of Raja Rao. New Delhi: Katha, 1998.
The Penguin Sri Aurobindo Reader. New Delhi: Penguin, 1999.
The Little Book of Sri Aurobindo. New Delhi: Penguin, 2001. Dehejia. New
Delhi: Samvad India, 2003.
The Penguin Swami Vivekananda Reader. New Delhi, 2005.
The Cyclonic Swami: Vivekananda in the West. With Sukalyan Sengupta.
New Delhi: Samvad India, 2005.
Dharma and Development: The Future of Survival. New Delhi: Samvad India,
2005.
Science and Spirituality in Modern India. New Delhi: Samvad India, 2006.
Earth Lessons: Three Essays on Saving the Planet. New Delhi: Vikram
Sarabhai Foundation, 2008. (With Devaki Singh).
Science, Spirituality and the Modernization of India. New Delhi: Anthem,
2008.
Sacred Australia: Post-secular considerations. Melbourne: Clouds of
Magellan, 2009; Indian Edition, with new Foreword and Preface, New Delhi:
Aditya Prakashan, 2010.

Translation

Boats from the Marathi original 'Hodya' by Hemant Govind Joglekar. New
Delhi: B.R. Publishers, 1994

...And to New Ones

To have designs on another
Degrades oneself;
The old Greek was right,
Platonic love is the best.
I knew this all along,
Preached this doctrine,
But couldn'd practice it myself.
To love is to give
But what does a beggar,
Himself needy, wandering the streets,
Pan-handling for love,
Know of giving himself to another?
No, he's too self-absorbed:
He ventures in vain
And returns as restless as he went.

So what are my options?
To remain strictly monogamous,
Regard every other woman
As a mother or sister?
To be desireless for ever
Without romance, appreciation, power?
Or else to evade the issue altogether
And play it by the ear?

Though I'm not at all sure
To lay down rules which I must follow,
I think this much I know:
I don't want to settle into
A boring and dull domesticity;
I want the freedom, however illusive,
To make friends, to seek afresh.
I don't think my romance with women
Has yet reached its end.
And yet I detest promiscuity or fornication:
Sex without soul is sordid.
So deception, whether with self,
Spouse or girlfriend, is out.
Then what's left?
Love-which is the other side of Truth-
Noble and fine and spiritual
Without a particle of jealousy or possessiveness,
More or less a dream, difficult to find:
Bhakti of friend to friend
The distillation of sringara rasa
Which made Krishna a brahmacharin
Though he had over sixteen thousand wives.

For the girls involved
It must be an experience
To be loved as they have never been
Before or after:

Post-experience innocence.
So, O Mother, teach me how to be
Your boyfriend:
Let that be my way of winning hearts
And saving souls.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

An Invitation to Old Flames...

Dears RP, DT, UK, PP, ST, J, LK, SR, SC, AB, JR, NV, RR, II, LC, RU
I solicit the honour of your presence
In this collection of love poems.
Like friends and well-wishers at a wedding ceremony,
I invite you to witness and bless
This garland of verses offered to my beloved.
Before saying anything else,
Let me declare that I cherish you-
Even unto eternity, to you a part of me belongs.
I am grateful for all that you've done for me
and my loyalty to you will never falter.
For like Krishna, my loves are many
And for every step that you've taken towards me,
I shall take two steps towards you.
I am sorry if I imposed myself on you
Sorry if my insistence made you anxious:
If thirsting is adolescence,
I don't know if I am grown up even now.
Each of you tried to teach me a lesson
Which I did not learn:
Don't ask for love, wait to receive it.
How unreasonable if not impossible were my demands
How hard I made it for myself and for you.
You have every right to think of me unkindly
As a tiresome jerk who couldn't take no for an answer.
Yet I don't want to forget you,
To reject my past, to lay old ghosts to rest,
To clear all debts with one measly poem.
Now that many of you are happily married,
You know I shall wish you the very best,
Of happiness, love, and prosperity,
And for those who are still single,
I wish you the partner of your choice
And a life full of fulfillment ahead.
So won't you, as my old friends and lovers,
Join this ceremony now and lend strength
With your good wishes, to this verse-necklace
For my wife: as I tie it around her neck
Like a sacred mangalsutra, won't you
Hands poised, shower on us consecrated rice
As they do confetti in western weddings?

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Apostrophe To Poverty

Poverty is not so easy to attain.
It is not all misery-belly-pinching brats,
motherless, naked and dirty, let loose
among garbage heaps on squalid streets;
it is not always a toothless importunate hag,
shrunken and gaunt, who, accosting you on the footpath,
clings and clings, pleading she has no other refuge;
it is not always the slum in Calcutta or Bombay
where during the monsoon, the pus of the city
oozes, and women, with babies at their breasts
wade across filthy gutters by the roadside
to reach their dissolute hovels; it is not always
some leper on display, limbs arranged on a cart,
a wrinkled begging bowl of tin balanced between
stubs of arms, pushed by his bandaged companion.
We, for whom poverty is the only sin,
miss the true meaning of what it is to be poor.

Regard myself in my own comfortable cage
twenty concrete floors above the common street
surrounded by my solacing clutter of machines:
my washers, dryers, heaters, coolers, mixers,
air-conditioners, refrigerators, cookers, grinders,
dish washers, vacuum cleaners, hi-fi stereos, CD-Roms-
wonderful possessions, too numerous to mention-
fabricate my secure and happy delusions. My day
which ended with a sedative, begins with the alarm
of a chronometer made in Japan. Wired to a shaver,
I adjust temperatures, turn on the coffee maker,
automatically dispose garbage, receive recorded messages
from the office, blip the tube for the Morning News,
open refrigerator, collect dishes from the washer,
breakfast instantly, and if not constipated, defecate,
shower, shampoo, condition, blow-dry hair, dress,
descend in the elevator to my automobile, waiting
in the bowels of the building. After I leave,
the fluffy carpet smothers the floor, bolted windows
preserve the air-conditioning; pets, and potted plants
on display, strategically placed for effect, languish
for want of sunshine and air.

Regard myself among
all these, my indispensable possessions. Can I
one muffled night, walk away from all this that ties me?
can I, oppressed by my fears and uncertainties,
disappear into the night to find all the answers?
'I shall not rest until I have found the truth'-
can I take such a vow and simply leave in the dark
without even a note, as over two thousand years ago
Gautama did? With all my engagements, can I
without notice, even take a vacation? No, impossible.
I will be registered with the Missing Persons Bureau.

The media will blare my absence; the major newspapers
announcing a reward for my capture, will print my
picture; my wife will hire detectives to track me down,
and if I am found, she will probably file for divorce,
suing me for desertion and maltreatment. Afterwards,
endless alimony payments will follow as a matter of course.
No, my friend, even if I want to, I cannot be poor.

Poverty, the plain fact is, cannot be inherited;
it has to be acquired, for it is a quality of the mind.
Poverty is the lack of need, not the want of possessions.
It cannot be forced, because it is voluntary.
He who knows what it is to be poor, always walks
upright; using only what he needs, refusing all excesses,
he is the essential man, without any superfluity.

Or, consider another angle:
we humans are beings of spirit and flesh.
some stuff the spirit, starve the flesh,
some starve the spirit and stuff the flesh.
Some die of too little, some die of too much,
and all those who die are equal. Hence,
privation and repletion are variations
of the same illness. So don't think that
being rich, in itself, is better than being poor,
for in the ultimate analysis, despite your wealth,
can you deny, that in truth you own only yourself?

Beyond a certain point,
I do not care to prolong this argument.
These words formed in indignation
always dissolve in a calm beyond comment.
My philosophy is simple
though some consider it partisan and limited:
the poor define their opposites;
without them none would be rich.
Hence, if nothing else,
let me here declare
my allegiance to my deprived countrymen,
however unlike them I may be.
Let poverty be my lot,
let me make this meagre offering
at the shrine of indigence.
Having now come out into the open,
taken sides for the rest of my days,
let me end,
on a note of uncharacteristic bluntness:
we mustn't extend our judgements
to what we do not comprehend;
we should accept each other,
as we are—rich or poor—
or mind our own business, please.

[Ffrom The Used Book]

Makarand Paranjape

College Days

In the grilled window overhead
Before ringing the bell
I see your face.
It is only love, nothing else.

You rush down the stairs
You hold my hand,
Your cheeks flushed with excitement.
It is only love, nothing else.

We sit on the lawn
In cushioned wicker chairs.
The night queen exudes its scent.
It is only love, nothing else.

You smile at me,
I lean over,
The world blurs out of focus again.
It is only love, nothing else.

At the sound of the car
We hastily disengage,
You rearrange your hair.
It is only love, nothing else.

* * *

Then, your parents suspect.
They inspect your mail,
They take counter measures.
It is only love, nothing else.

We meet elsewhere
Whispering in dingy cafes,
Under the waiter's suspicious gaze.
It is only love, nothing else.

Or else outside your college,
Or on a park bench,
Or in a shopping centre on a weekend.
It is only love, nothing else.

On your birthday, before the final exam,
You lie you're at a friend's place,
We meet in an expensive restaurant.
It is only love, nothing else.

In the dim light you say
We can't go on like this.
In silence I stare ahead.
It is only love, nothing else.

* * *

At last it is time to graduate.
You hold my last letter,
Now smudged, tightly to your chest.
It is only love, nothing else.

What will become of me, you wail,
My throat catches too,
The sari slips off your heaving breasts.
It is only love, nothing else.

In a flash, all the memories-
Letters, phone calls, innumerable meetings-
Dart by as we watch, helpless.
It is only love, nothing else.

You resist my caress, at first
But suddenly yield, with vehemence.
It is to be our last embrace.
It is only love, nothing else.

I leave town.
You settle down,
Marrying somebody else.
It is only love, nothing else.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Compatible Incompatibility

After all, what's the worst thing that I can say
About you and our marriage? It is this:
I don't love you - cannot, the way I want to love
A woman; and that we are incompatible, by nature
Utterly different from one another; finally,
That we'll never really be happy, together.
After having said the worst,
I immediately begin to feel better:
The only way now is up.
And I try to rationalize away my hurt;
We cannot live up to anyone else's standards
Of love, happiness, or compatibility.
It's best to leave these women's magazine issues,
And get on with our own lives,
Figuring out our own way.
Till we can agree, let's follow this simple rule:
You do what you like, I do what I;
And sometimes we can do it together.
Let us be true to each other
By being true to ourselves;
Let us find strength in our weakness.
Because, hey darling, don't you see
That as long as you can still hurt me,
I'll never be able to leave you.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Dharmaraj

In the city of sin the dizzy wheel spun
twirling glittering talons of light.
He closed his burning eyes,
raw lids squeezed out the tears
and in the hot, pale glow within
appeared the faces of those he loved.

The smooth deck spilled, splashing blood,
toppling the pile of white chips.
In the polished surface beneath he saw
strangers stripping his palaces,
strangers driving his chariots,
strangers sifting the leftovers.

The cunning wheel stopped
the crimson knave laughed
and in the distance slowly,
the gathering scavengers stirred.

'Don weeds, precious ones
huddle up for a long journey;
the dice are loaded.
See! see! the spotted ivory winks!'

[From The Used Book]

Makarand Paranjape

Duryodhana's Last Word

He lies near the stinking pond
filled with guts and blood;
all around him-devastation and death.
Himself a half-carcass,
his thighs and testes smashed
by Bhima's illegitimate blow,
broken in several places,
left to die,
his twisted face lights up again
at the macabre apparition-
Ashwatthama.
And as this angel of death
narrates the tale of the final
slaughter-how he stole into
the Pandava tents after dusk
putting to the sword
every man, woman and child,
Duryodhana's smashed, bleeding,
mouth-wound replies:
"Good, good, good."

[From The Used Book]

Makarand Paranjape

Epilogue (As an Old-Fashioned Homily)

At the end of my labour
A familiar voice consoles me in intimate whispers:
Don't worry, honey, you haven't erred
In this public celebration of our love.
The great monuments to love like the Taj Mahal,
Transformed private emotions into social ritual.
No grand passion can be contained
Within secret diaries or letters
But must spill out sooner or later into the open.
Love, like money, must be shared,
Not hoarded: so it can multiply.
To broadcast love, therefore, is no crime.
But beware of making it an act
A stunt to gain cheap publicity or praise....
Before she admonishes me further,
I stop her mouth with half a dozen kisses.
The rest of her warnings
Become silly mumblings inside my head.
But now I'd better make a quick getaway
Before I am hooted out by my audience,
And though not vain enough to think (like John Donne)
That our love can serve as an example,
Let me just say, dear reader, that if someone loves you,
Be they fair or plain, don't let go of them:
You won't get such chances again and again.
But if for some reason you cannot reciprocate,
Treat them gently, release them with tenderness,
Remembering Bulleh Shah's wise pronouncement:
Break a temple or a mosque,
But don't break a heart full of love.
For, as the good book saith, the greatest of all is Love.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Eyes

All the cliches in love poetry, it turns out, are true.
Eyes have sex organs and sex organs have eyes.

As Ma Ananda Sheela said of Rajneesh:
He didn't sleep with me, but he was a man of my eyes.

From across the room, her eyes made mouths at him;
But she discovered that she was moist between her legs.

Without saying anything she did it all with him;
Women are like that, he thought, silent but devastating.

He did nothing to her, but she still squirmed uncomfortably;
Eyes, not hands, should be clean.

With mounting pleasure her lids dimmed gradually;
When the eye of love opens, the other shuts automatically.

When she said, exasperated, but I have only two eyes,
How conveniently one forgets oneself, he thought shamelessly.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Food for Thought

The sky has darkened before its time:
a swarm of locusts,
not a thunder-storm.

To protect my tender crops
I build foolish fires,
burning everything handy.
The smoke drives some away,
kills some. The rest descend.
Hosts of them camp in my head.
Frenzied, I run about,
stamping the earth with bare heels.
I shout, clapping bits of tin
to distract the devouring.

When there is a famine within
we shan't go completely hungry:
we'll heap all the dead words
and cook them. It is said
they are delicious with rice and lentils.

[From The Used Book]

Makarand Paranjape

Getting Outside Patriarchy

Our distances are intimate,
We grow vast in our silences.
In freedom we have blossomed,
Not having thwarted one another.
How unrestricted are our movements:
We have never tried to trim each other to size.

You come back, asynchronous,
Twisted by your concourse with others.
I react to your divergences.
How we have fought,
With no holds barred
Tearing at each other fiercely,
Until our brains nearly exploded.
Then, all anger spent,
Not one word or hit, left unstruck,
We gaze at each other mutely-
Astonished at the devastation
Each has wrought on the other.
Standing forlorn amidst the debris of our selves,
We heal, and once again
Stretch towards each other,
All our crooked places straightened.

We are the enemies of each other's egos
Ruthless in hunt;
Thus we destroy and recreate each other ceaselessly.
Yet our eyes talk and understand
The subtle signals of love,
The open smile of happiness
Wrapping the other in a warm embrace.
Indeed, our gestures are complete.

My curses have failed.
The blows that I struck you
Drained me of all violence.
Even memories have lost their sting.
Instead, eternal be my blessing
Overflowing all the harsh sayings,
Washing them away like loose dirt.

So go, you are not mine-
Prosper and flower wherever you are.
And yet stay,
Grow strong and straight
Like a companion eucalyptus,
Tall and elegant,
And restless in the breeze.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Hauz-i-Khas

Approach

The path is six hundred years old.
On the way you will see peacocks
And, if you are lucky, some deer.
From this parapet
The empty, dried lake looks like
An immense ditch,
A grotesque seventy-acre dugout—
A gouged eye of earth.
The old emperor chose this quiet spot
For his grave. There he is—
In a simple enclosure of sandstone
That anyone can approach.
Beside him lie a son and a grandson
To keep him company, perhaps.

Does she remember
How this place intrigued us?
We haunted it constantly,
Walking here from her house
To be alone, together.
We speculated upon these ruins
From the sketchy tourist notice
Put at the entrance by the archaeological survey:
Just this brief walk would turn centuries.
We sat overlooking the pit,
Holding hands sometimes
While the attendant slyly looked on.
Does she remember
The December sun soaking into us?
And how one day
The birds flew away when we came,
Flapping in an enormous mottled flock from the tomb.
'They're migrating,' she pronounced,
In her characteristic, solemn, symbolic way.
Does she remember?

This hollow goes back to times before Altamash.
But it was Firoz Shah who made it a lake
Cementing the sides, clearing the bottom,
Sealing it to hold water.
The college, which Firoz Shah also built,
Is almost in ruins.
Only the pillared assembly hall still stands.

The lawns are well-maintained
And the walls of the tomb
Are not disfigured
With the names of vain lovers.

Night.
In the steely moonlight,

The royal lake slowly fills up
Before my eyes.
I hear the ripple of gentle water.
Behind me, the scholars are asleep
In their cramped quarters.
The burly, heavily armed Afghan guard,
With a sharp, close-cut beard
Dozes, leaning on his spear.
From the dark
An old Mulla in his long black cloak
Walks into the balcony
Counting his beads,
His white beard quivering...
It's time for the last prayer of the day.

From a distance
I watch the light in her house
Go out.

Makarand Paranjape

Her Strategy

She got a lot done by doing so little;
She said, 'I love you,' and left the rest to him.

She fed him, nursed him, and slaved for him;
She was no feminist but, when the time came, she left him.

He wandered, beast-like, ash-smearred, covered with hides,
Until she reclaimed him and made him a human being.

As the moth entered, the flame shone even more brightly;
He realized that such deaths don't come so easily.

He boasted, blustered, threatened to leave her forever;
Instead, he fell unconscious until her touch revived him.

During the day she was flamboyant, bold, quick;
But at night she pleaded, darling please turn out the lights.

When she went to Kathmandu, he went to Kanyakumari
Only to discover that the continent wasn't large enough to divide them.

When the veil dropped, the incense became camphor, not musk;
Chastened, he prayed, O Mother, please forgive my profanities.

He thought he could teach her a lesson or two in celibacy
But he found a child asleep beside him who'd forgotten her sex completely.

After years of abnegation, recovering his wits he looked at her appealingly
But she wasn't a switch to be turned on or off at will.

Obsessed with performance he wished to go on and on;
Relax, she said, this isn't 'publish or perish.'

Insecure to the extreme, he tried to steal her friends
Until, one by one his friends said that they preferred her to him.

He proposed to a hundred women and became a laughing stock;
When she accepted him, they weren't more astonished than him.

Our love is so ordinary, he thought, looking at their lives;
But she never complained: he lacked imagination, not she.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

In Lieu Of The Missing Poem

Dear Reader,

A poem at the centre of the collection,
Is missing, as you can gather.
To speak truly, its absence, equally
Baffles me. Did I lose it to computer virus
Or did the censor excise it;
Or were there only twenty-nine in all,
Making this the unwritten poem?
Or does this represent the overwhelmingly absent presence,
Suggesting, like nirvana or the impossible
Revolution, something that we strive towards,
But never attain-I mean, Love?
Thus it becomes all that I was unable to say,
The sunya in the heart of purna,
The cavity in the middle of the decentred
Text; in a word, the death of the self,
(Or instead of the missing poem, these sixteen lines.)

Makarand Paranjape

In Love (At Thirty)

To make even one single person happy,
To love her completely, to give her without restraint
All that you could if you were God himself;
Or to love, even a plant, an animal,
Any piece of life; to nurture it,
To care, to have tenderness for someone else;
Even to do this just once, fully and entirely,
Is to fulfill one's life and find heaven afterwards.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Invocation

Homage to Shiva-Shakti
The first and greatest of lovers,
Whose love bears the burden of cosmic mysteries;
Then obeisance to Ganesha, Lord of the masses,
Remover of obstacles, who loves dance, music, poetry,
And all the arts: vouchsafe the safe passage
Of this slender verse-offering at Love's shrine;
Look benignly on a beginner's faltering muse,
Which totters even as it commences
Not unlike a new-born heifer struggling to get on its feet,
Lowling in feeble and pitiful accents for its Mother;
Thus I humbly invoke your blessings:
Accord this venture a propitious starting,
And may the poetry please discerning audiences.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Latasha

I

Untouched by the words it sings
The voice retains its pristine quality.
Even when the lyrics signify messy happenings-
Heart-break, perfidy, crass sensuality:
The guiltless voice countenances the emotions,
Rehabilitating them to their original innocence.
What a range of love has she expressed,
Unrivalled in achievement and finesse.
Yet she retains the untainted sacred spirit:
The high-priestess of love remains a virgin.

II

She sings of love profane
The voice is coquettish and throaty
Suggesting rich experience:
It promises fulfillment
Of passions, ecstasies, desires,
The silky intoxication of the self-annihilating embrace,
An invitation to seize the night,
For tomorrow is uncertain and yesterday unknown:
So come into my inviting arms, she sings...
After all, flesh is flesh.

Thus together the two demonstrate in love
The sisterhood of the spirit and flesh.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Like Yajnavalkya And Maitreyi

I read the love poems of others
With quiet disgust-
The unending obsession with sex,
The sad broken lives,
The innumerable trials
To find understanding, perfection;
It is like walking with bare feet
On broken glass.

The incompleteness
Of their lives leaves the mind
Pensive and soulful,
Like an autumn sky at dusk.
In the midst of this you stand out
Like a torch of pure white flame
Devoid of smoke.
And our love for each other flows on
Like a bubbling stream of clear water
Over the pebbles of life;
Very quietly, with minimal fuss,
Devoid of allurements or disguise.
Oh! the peace of the desireless mind!

II

The song was of lovers entangled
In an impossible relationship:
After the blossoming of passion,
Now the inevitable separation.
The only question that remained
Was how to make the parting
As painless as possible-

Come, once more,
Let us become strangers
To one another...

The room was full of people,
Many couples
Seated together or apart,
Tied by uneasy threads,
Primarily of matrimony,
But perhaps, also of sex,
Jealousy, and ownership.

And the thought struck me:
What if we were strangers once more?
Having freedom again, would I turn elsewhere
With frenzy and anticipation?
If I had to start all over again
Would I want to only with you?
As if in answer,

Our angularities dropped away,
Revealing only the eternal feminine
And the eternal masculine.
Our personalities vanished
Like bubbles of white foam
On the dark, silent sea of life.

III

Of late, I have grown superstitious.
The other day, for instance, I thought
About the ritual we couldn't perform:
Seven circumambulations around the fire,
Garments knotted.
Looking into your eyes, I wonder
What secret cord ties us to each other then?
And the inevitability of our situation
Suddenly becomes clear.
There is no one else to turn to:
In our union,
The world comes to an end.

At night,
Your palm in mine, softens
Like that of a child.
Sometimes you call me in your sleep.
Who are you, I ask
Trying to peer beneath the mind that chose me.
But only the echo of my question
Reprimands,
'As if you have to ask! '

Long ago,
I stopped thinking about you
And you passed from
Thought into being.
What a relief that was
When you merged
Simply, into existence.
For me, you are.
I never have to think what,
Just as I never question
What I am.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Love Poetry

After months of silence, there comes a day
When I feel I can turn anything I wish to say
Into poetry. And they talk so much
About the discipline of being a poet,
Of setting up schedules for practicing the craft.
But look at us vagrants-the muse feeds us too,
And we too manage to scrape by.
So Ezekiel was right.
As it is with love, it must be with poetry:
Wait, wait, wait, and never force the pace.
Years vanish behind one, leaving only the debris
Of so many wasted afternoons with no sympathy,
No relief, no reward. Then the pain
And humiliation of so many rejections; jealousy
And rage over the success of other poets,
And one's own pathetic rationalizations-
He knew so and so, she was lucky-and throughout
The same nagging question: 'Am I of any worth?'
But then this also passes and one feels
A lightness, freedom, and confidence,
That comes from having nowhere to go,
No one really to speak to, none to impress.
So, my doors are ever open to you, poetry,
Come when you will: how can I seek you and what for?
Effort destroys poetry as it destroys love.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Love's Success

Love always exceeds its objects
which, however great or beautiful,
are subject to time, decay, and death:
after their brief season in the sun,
they lose their fresh bloom, so magical,
and harden slowly or rot in their youth.
But love remains eternally youthful,
whether embodied as a silly, naked boy
wilfully shooting his invisible darts
at unsuspecting victims, or entirely bodiless,
too subtle to behold, but still quivering
in every heart's secret places. Love is not
subject to us, but we are subject to it:
it changes its objects like soiled garments
or the deathless soul it's transient bodies.

[From Partial Disclosure]

Makarand Paranjape

Magan Bhai

Before he committed suicide
Magan Bhai met me one night
my parents were out at a movie.
Ringing the doorbell at an unusual hour,
he stood in the doorway
and started a conversation.
A small, dapper fellow in his twenties,
he had married young,
and had a daughter in the first standard.
Today he was misty-eyed
and smelled of whiskey.
The talk turned to films
which were his passion.
Before he joined the Company,
he had been an usher
at the Bombay Talkies.
'You must have seen your favourite films
several times,' I remarked.
'Ah yes,' he said, "but it was so boring
to see the same films again and again.
There were a very few," he mused,
"which were good enough for that-
Kagaz ke Phool-Paper Flowers—
have you seen it?-
was certainly one of them."

Like its protagonist, he claimed,
he was a man much abused
and misunderstood by the world:
'Here I am, no more really
than the caretaker of the Guest House:
paid a pittance per month,
but from my lifestyle
can you tell my income?
Look at my clothes:
aren't they as smart as yours?
Have you ever seen me
wearing a wrinkled shirt?
You may wonder how I manage
Well, that's the whole secret
of my existence.
By the grace of God
I have been favoured
with luck on the race course.
I have laid up money
to start a small-scale industry.
If my daughter wants to study abroad,
I have enough in the bank for her.
Can you believe that right now
I am actually a partner
in a small store on Brigade Road?
Yes, I have done my duty,

paid my dues.
Today I am a free man.
No one can fault me if I'm gone....'
His voice tremulous,
his loosened tongue wagged on
until one a.m.

Actually, he died
leaving a pile of unpaid debts.
So well-behaved, so respectful
to his employers and superiors,
no one suspected that
he ran up the company account
with grocers in the city
for thousands of rupees.
He had lost at the track,
lost at the card table;
and, when the Directors were out,
he sat at the bar of the Guest House
drinking the choicest liquors
at Company expense.
And one day, when he could
no longer sustain the act,
they found him dead,
sprawled on the expensive carpet,
his face the colour of sandpaper,
and a can of 'Tik-20'
(specially purchased for the rose garden)
half-empty by his side.

His death was reported
as 'Accident on Duty,'
which allowed his wife to collect
the maximum coverage on the insurance.
She was spared the debts,
but not the humiliation,
and left with his child
for a faceless widowhood
in some backward village.

After the event,
the inevitable verbal post-mortem:
what had spoiled Magan Bhai?
What had turned his head?
'He ought to have belonged
to some wealthy family
where his princely instincts
might have come to aught,'
commiserated a fellow-worker.
In public, however, everyone
roundly condemned the vices
that led to his end,

pointing out his case,
as a moral unto the others.
A few of his cronies
(their wives thanked heaven)
suddenly turned pious;
but most, after a brief suspense,
relapsed to their former ways.
The company Physician
(who had certified the death as accidental)
relaxing over a scotch with my father
confidentially observed:
'Born penniless, hardly educated,
could Magan ever have attained
the good life he so badly craved?
No! Not in this lifetime!
Attempting short-cuts
to wealth and power
in a society structured
for little upward movement
he was bound to fail.'
I overheard their sober reflections in silence.

Magan Bhai,
always the first volunteer
in any community event,
who took us when we were young
to movies and cricket matches,
is forgotten today.
The Directors, of course,
deigned no comments
on his untimely death,
but ordered that
the new valet in his place
be watched closely each day.

[From The Used Book]

Makarand Paranjape

Maya

The see-saw of our relationship tires me.
But neither of us seems to be able to get off.

We have nothing in common
And that's what keeps us together.

Neither friends nor lovers nor man and wife
What we are, I cannot tell.

It's true that I cannot understand you
But that's only the fruit of so many years of trying to.

With quiet relief I watch us drift apart,
But it is alarming how we always make up again.

Unhappiness is a way of life
Those who are used to it actually begin to like it.

Certainly, marriages are made in heaven
Where else would they have thought of uniting us?

This relationship wrings virtue from my rage
Because I find I always give in to you in the end.

You're right, I'm wrong, make no mistake about it,
But knowing that doesn't make giving any easier for me.

You are wonderful to those who need you
To us who remain silent, you turn your face away.

The humiliation of needing you silently
Exceeds the pleasure of possessing you.

You have no shame when you ask
It is I who am ashamed to refuse.

It feels terrible to hurt another
But how strange it is to look forward to the pain.

Instead of giving love and joy to each other,
We have excelled in giving each other pain.

I am unable even to tell you how unhappy I am
For fear of making you unhappier by saying it.

In the end you cry
And your suffering is more real than my grudge.

Again I defer to you
Because unhappiness is an addiction.

This war of attrition tires me out

I fall asleep and dream that we are happy together.

After such an absence
I thought we could do so many things together;

But now that there's just you and me
We turn away from each other and sleep.

While I write this I see your pained eyes
And I know this poem must never be published.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Miss Gobble

The unkempt municipal garden
between the college and the railway station
provides the setting for our action.
In a secluded corner, shaded by the old neem
squats a bench once probably green,
now carved with sundry profanities.
There once a week, we keep our tryst.
At night if there are no drunks prowling, or cops
on the beat, the park is your territory.
Then carrying my awkward burden, of necessity,
in you I seek release. Better your deal, I think
than descending to base extremes; besides
I am told, by shunning intercourse, one can
prevent disease. But even if that's not
true and I'm equally susceptible with you,
I'd come-because, how shall I put it?-
you have a way with such things. Also,
you always perform single-handedly
and I hate go-betweens, or solicitings.
Last, but not the least, you charge
only ten rupees.

Once the money is paid
and my knees are conveniently splayed,
you consider it unprofessional to delay.
So whether I am at my best or worst,
I usually succumb, because you have me
quite literally, under your thumb.
Then in the crook of your palm,
you give me a quick run-down
of all the skills at your command;
no wonder I prefer you to my right hand.
But, by now I am ready to stand on my own,
so you promote me to the preferred location.

Sometimes I wonder at our situation. I don't
know your name, or from where you come;
we hardly speak the same language and, indeed,
have so little in common; then how do we manage
to get so much done? When my thoughts take such
a turn, my position undergoes a drastic alteration.
Suddenly, I become assailed by unwelcome sensations-
the open noisome gutter, is just one example;
then, your own not too pleasant odour, bothers.
With our chronic water shortage, such inconveniences,
I know, cannot be helped; but they add to the squalor
of your already sullied vocation. In this manner,
while you are busy plying your intention
and in the dark, your face betrays no emotion,
I lapse into these depressing cogitations:
how do you, with only a mouthful or two for supper
go to bed each night on an empty stomach? And

despite my precautions, I get deeply involved
in the poverty of your lot.

But on this point
I get unsettled: you deftly twist your tongue
and without knowing it, I emit a deep groan.
You grab the advantage, perk up operations;
I retreat a bit from too much stimulation-
at this critical juncture, I suddenly lose
control over the situation: unable to prolong
the transaction, heedless of repercussions,
I acquit myself to my utmost satisfaction.

But by this time the issue has staled,
and, your dues being already settled,
I feel disinclined to extend this session.
Walking off, I leave you on the bench tidying-up.
Incidentally, your next client happens to be someone
I know; his room is opposite mine on the same floor.
Perhaps he'll drop in afterwards to compare notes.

[From The Used Book]

Makarand Paranjape

My Buried Youth

Each vacation, we measured our years
by the progress of the new tar road.

Electricity had come when I was very young,
but the servant quarter was yet unwired.
A flickering wick on the earthen floor
cast warm, inviting shadows. There, at sundown,
the handymen relaxed on haunches, softly chatting,
and their -beedies-, at each deep puff, fiercely glowed.
In the little room to the right of the hall
ranged sooty lanterns, ready for special use-
like when you had to, after dark, visit the latrine
which was by the distant compound wall,
or when unexpectedly, the electricity went off.

On the dark, empty beach, there we could be free
to play out our fantasies. Two cousins in pony tails,
flushed with youth, would pretend to be film stars.
They taught us, in English, to say 'Hi' and 'Bye'
which was pretty ahead of our times in 1965.
The wind sighed its longing through the evergreens,
and the sea complained constantly even when out of sight.
By sunset, we had to leave though our castles were
incomplete.
On the way back, a broken club-house and tennis court
always spiced our curiosity: who could have played
tennis, here in this remote, undeveloped village?

The spacious wash house was built around the well.
It was dark and cool, even in the hottest spells:
if you came in from the bright warm sun, it took
some blinking before you could see clearly again.
In the large well hung a deep and friendly silence.
Its stones were mossed and slippery. When you
let go the rusty bucket, the wooden pulley whirred.
The splash that followed was always superficial:
you had to wait for the bucket to drink its fill
before plying the pulley, whose old handles were smoothed
by rough palms. When the dripping bucket emerged,
the brown, whiskered cord glistened, wet and taut.
In the morning, still together, but not so well-disposed
standing in single file, we brushed our teeth, grumbled,
and the dark gutter was streaked with our white spittle.
An old bronze boiler supplied the hot water. The aunts,
with soap and towel, retreated into the smaller rooms
taking one bucket of well-water, another steaming hot.
They warmed the stone seat before closing the door;
then, emptying pitcherfuls over their shoulders, the bath.

Before supper-time, long prayers had to be intoned.
Perched cross-legged on a broad, creaking swing
we feigned earnestness by swaying to the beat,

but when left to ourselves, never failing to skip.

By nine, we lay on -charpoys- in the yard, gazing at the sky.

On moonlit nights, the yellow -champak- was fragrant and luminous;
there were earth smells too, the plants being freshly watered,
and in season, the lush scent of mangoes ripening in the porch.
The custom was to tell each other stories, until no one spoke
except the cicadas, who kept tedious vigil without repose.

My great-grandfather built that mansion
for a sum of only rupees six thousand.
(But that was in 1907.)
He was a pleader in the Thane district court,
sufficiently modern to smoke. His brand:
555s, which then came in round tins.
With cane, -topi-, and waxed moustache,
he is portrayed upstairs in black-and-white.
In a dusty closet rest some of his things:
an ancient iron safe effectively conceals
debentures and bonds of poor investments,
an insurance policy that returned no yields.
Dozing undisturbed for decades, cob webbed shelves
retain withered tomes, ledgers, rusted biscuit cases,
invoices, faded letterheads, clotted ink, quills,
lacquered paperweights; underneath, on the chest,
bandages, enema equipment, enamel bowls,
scented water in sealed bottles, rusted scissors,
red salve, rats bane, ointment, tincture iodine,
epsom salts...

I could, of course, go on,
but to cut the long story short, when
the road reached the shrine of the Monkey God,
as you are likely to have guessed by now,
we went far away from our ancestral home.
That summer, hoping, as usual, to return,
I hid something precious in the pigeon cote
in the musty alcove over the parlour door.
Now continents later, unsure of my past,
in vain I try to recollect that nuance.
I know I mourn a conventional loss-
you too, I dare say, wistfully long
for one or two memories,
misplaced beyond recall.
My childhood belongs to another tongue,
it briefly came back to me just now,
like snatches of a forgotten song.
You don't blame me, do you,
for writing these fragments down?

[From The Used Book]

Makarand Paranjape

Papiah

After a month's vacation
when Papiah returned to work,
his hands were spotted white,
as with leukoderma. Preceding him,
the news of the scandal had spread:
the seniormost driver of the firm
discarding his wife and children,
had settled down hereabouts
with a woman of ill-repute.
Recently, in a fire at her house,
instead of deserting 'the whore,'
he had risked his life to save her;
and in the process, the burns.
Faced with all this slander,
Papiah conducted himself
with laudable indifference.
With a spitefulness peculiar to children,
I decided to try him: with feigned innocence,
I asked him the reason for the spots.
Papiah unbuttoned his collar and cuffs,
showed me burn-marks all over:
'The neighbour's house was on fire
with all the womenfolk trapped inside.
In saving the life of one,
I sustained the burns.' I persisted:
'But how did you save her? '
'By pulling off her -sari-.'
I pretended to be shocked;
slightly nettled, he protested,
'What else could one have done in the situation? '
The topic ended there, with Papiah
breaking into a violent cough.

'He's coughing his life away,
can't you see, and yet
the wretch knows no repentance.
Each evening after work,
he's back with his slut,'
a fellow-driver
told me after a few months.
That was the first time
I realized he had consumption.

For the next six months
Papiah reported regularly to work,
though visibly weakened.
Gossip was now his only companion:
'He doesn't send a -pai- home,
squanders it all on his `keep.'
But does she care?
No Sir, not her.
Even his wife refuses

to see his face now,'
A former friend of his
affirmed in a conversation.
When I enquired after his family,
I was told by another:
'What can they do, Sir?
they are begging by the roadside;
yet, perhaps he has some land
which his wife manages at home.'
'Why can't you reason with him?
after all, you're his friend,'
I ventured. 'Sir, he has no friends;
I gave myself a headache
trying to talk him out of his vices,
but the fellow is adamant.
He has completely lost
his honour and reputation.
Do you know that he spends
his medicine allowance on liquor?
He's half the size he used to be,
spitting his life by the hour.
He'll die soon, no better, surely
than a stray dog in a gutter....'

Some weeks later,
Papiah was confined to a sanatorium.
My mother wrote off all the debts
he had incurred for his medicines.
The Management, too, was kinder to him,
paying his expenses without stinting.
They even published a photo-feature on him
in the house journal.
The write-up was in English,
a language he had never learned
and I don't think he ever saw his picture.
Papiah sank rapidly, dying soon after.
The last comment he evoked was
'Poor man, he willed himself to death.'

[From The Used Book]

Makarand Paranjape

Portrait of a Lady

She was a small person in a big house
stacked with objects d'art and other curiosities.
She fancied herself a collector
and, when coaxed to disclose her sources,
never failed to mention
her brushes with ex-royalty.

The drawing room had two large bongo-drums-
'Go ahead,' she breezed, 'they're for sitting'-
and two or three raucous and gaudy parakeets
in cages. There must have been
other noteworthy items that I did not notice.
Adjacent to the drawing room was a hot house
where exotic plants luxuriated in ultra violet light.
I didn't see much point in it:
it was warm enough outside.
That brought the tour to an end,
the kitchen and the bedrooms upstairs,
being off limits.

At lunch she praised the ruling party
and mentioned, in passing,
that her cutlery was British
and, yes, her crystal Belgian.

On the way out through the porch,
we stopped to admire the imported Cadillac.
At the gate, just beneath 'Beware of Dogs,'
a copper-plated signboard announced
three charitable trusts named after her:
'That's just for tax purposes,' she said carelessly,
as she waved me goodbye with a flying kiss.

[From The Used Book]

Makarand Paranjape

Prologue

Introductions, so they say, mustn't be too long;
But I can't exactly promise to obey that law.
There are, I take it, many texts in this post-structural age,
In which introductions become interminable
Because, quite simply, there's nothing to introduce,
No main body, no inner chamber, no sanctum designate,
Nowhere to lead into, nowhere to 'intro ducere':
Just mazes, passages, and entrances,
Decentred disseminations of differance.
So these poems may lead nowhere but back to myself,
Voices in my own consciousness seeking release and play.
In that sense, isn't love an internal adjustment,
The sport of Shiva and Shakti which leads to endless jouissance.
If that's the case, there's only one love story, not many,
And we all enact different versions of it.
So much for the philosophical presuppositions of this text,
None of which need be taken too seriously.
Now to its artistic and aesthetic bases:
These are harder far to ignore or neglect.
Love poetry, everybody knows, has been written in all ages and climes,
And starting a new love poem must necessarily induce
An almost insurmountable anxiety of influence.
Remember Jessica and Lorenzo in 'The Merchant of Venice',
Those rather unimportant side-kicks to the protagonists?
How even they recalled the whole prehistory of lovers
When finally alone and face to face on a bright moonlit night:
The lovers' list that they invoked, of Cressida and Troilus,
Of Thisbe (and, by implication, Pyramus) , of Dido and Aeneas,
Of Medea and Jason, is formidable enough and would be even longer,
But for a timely interruption by the device of a Shakespearean messenger.
So whom should I invoke? Our great poets, Kalidasa and Bharatrihari,
Or the enduring tradition of the sport of Krishna, our greatest lover,
Or, skipping centuries, should I remember such historical lovers
As Prithviraj and Samyukta, or Shah Jehan and Mumtaz Mahal?
Or legends such as Laila-Majnun, Shirin-Farhad, Heer-Ranjha?
Or crossing centuries and epistemes again, meditate on Raj and Nargis-
Not so much in real life as in the movies-or to bring myself up to date,
Yash Chopra's latest fantasy, 'Chandani' enacted by inimitable Sridevi?
The point is that all new love stories are grounded in older ones.
I wish, though, that this spiel on the intertextuality of love tales
Would silence my own uncertainties and fears.
Simply put, they are: what's so great about this love story?
The lovers are neither rich, nor beautiful, nor glamorous:
Both 'S' and 'M' are just ordinary, urban, bourgeois kids,
So why celebrate their love? What's so special about them?
Did they break the rules, create scandals, cheat on each other,
Or were they star-crossed lovers doomed together?
Or is their claim to celebrity and immortality
Founded on some other outrageous and flamboyant perversity?
The answers, I am afraid, are all in the negative:
They're just like anyone else, nothing really to write poetry about.
She studied in Lady Irwin College and he in St Stephen's.

Though they were distantly related, they hadn't really met until then.
They fell in love and went through the usual difficulties-
All this happened in Delhi in the late 1970's.
Eventually, they got married in the USA.
And after spending four or five years there they returned
To India to take up respectable, but fairly mundane employment.
After this, there is little to tell: in any case,
Most of these biographical details are irrelevant to the poems.
She turns thirty, not a very romantic age,
But he falls in love with her again-
Or so he thinks he should like to believe-
And decides to celebrate the event
By sending her thirty or nearly thirty poems-
Kama's arrowheads-and hence this collection.
I have been very honest, this, dear reader, you cannot deny,
Spelling out everything in a fairly straight forward way.
In addition to all the usual problems of language,
And the contradictions of the post-colonial age,
There's nothing great about these poems,
Nothing much to analyze or explicate:
They have the usual influences-in this Prologue itself,
For instance, you may find some Rushdie or Seth-
Take your pick, but in any case, the style is cliché-ridden.
If there are still a few things that I have left out
The omissions can't be of much significance.
As an English teacher, you know,
I am always available for explanation or comment.
But now, if you excuse me,
I should get on to the main subject,
Which, as you by now know only too well,
Is love, love, love-and if you'll accept my parting advice,
Kindly forget all that I've said
In what I realize has been a very prosaic preface.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Proposal

Mon cherie, this New Year's Eve,
Let's get married,
Again.
I think the time is right for me to pop the question at last.
Yes, thank you for waiting so long.
The first time around,
I wasn't quite ready.
I was too young, too callow,
Both of us were under stress, as you know.
And the circumstances forced our decision.
But now, I am in full possession of my bearings,
Sound in mind and body, as they say,
Settled in life, able to decide where my interests lie.
And so, after considered reflection,
I send you my proposal.
You're pretty, you're well to do, you're highly eligible;
What's more, your aura, which others can't see,
Is spotlessly clean. I am fully satisfied
That you're everything I want a woman to be.
So: will you marry me?
I don't know what I can offer in return;
You decide, whether I meet your expectations or not.
I can't promise that I will make you happy,
But I shall try, with all my heart:
To be true to you till death do us part.

Makarand Paranjape

PS: Venus Serenus

She steps out of the frame
Like Botticelli's venus from the giant scallop shell:
But, of course, she's fully clad.
She walks down two steps from the stage
Of the college auditorium.
Her silk sari unfreezes from its upturned swish
As she descends, right foot forward,
Stretched to make contact with the lower step.
The left foot, except for the high-heel of her sandal,
Remains hidden in the folds of the sari.
Her right hand mirrors the graceful arch of her foot,
Holding her sari up with a handkerchiefed fist,
One glass bangle has slid on to her wrist,
While the others still cluster on a smooth, tapering, forearm.
In the other hand she holds a placard,
With '89' printed in large figures on it.
Her neck is bent forward, but the eyes look sideways and up,
As if askance at me.
The expression on the face is of uncomfortable puzzlement.
Behind are three girls in bell-bottoms looking somewhere ahead.
This picture of hers, circa 1977,
Turns me on the most,
Though I hadn't even met her then.
The occasion: a mandatory fresher's parade
On the last day of ragging in Lady Irwin College.

She's already coming down to join the audience
When I pull her out of the photograph.
How safe I have been so far,
The ultimate voyeur,
Watching her in complete security and immunity.
How I imagine making love to her at seventeen,
Mischievously thinking to myself,
That all of her is mine-past, present, and future.
The black blouse is tight over her firm breasts.
The nipples point upwards, and I see that her bust
Is not even fully formed yet.
The face radiates innocence;
Like Shakuntala in the hermitage,
She has been touched by no man.
As I crush her small hand in mine,
She utters a cry of surprise and pain:
'Who are you?' she screams, 'Let me go....'
She wrenches herself from my grasp
And struggles back into the photograph again.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Random Notes on Relationship

1

'It takes restraint to nurture
a relationship. Haste and greed
finish it quickly: you eat through
all the good parts and then
there's nothing left to relish.'

2

The would-be husband
frowned upon my advice:
looking at his lovely fiancée
with mock-longing, he quipped:
'When I most long for her
she'll quote these lines,
as a shield against me.'

3

I thought of the logic
of bourgeois marriages:
demurely saying 'please wait' before;
'yes' only after the completion
of all the paper work-
and never being able to say 'no'
afterwards:
how law, custom, and culture
regulate the entrance
to a woman's body.

4

The problem is in what we feel,
not with what we do or don't:
it's the emotions behind our actions
that break hearts.
The woman who touches another man
can be taken back, "forgiven";
but what can you do when
when she's stopped caring for you
her heart empty or dead?

5

I used to believe
that truth saves relationships
and deception destroys them.
But I realized too late
that 'Human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.'
Perhaps, it's what
we hide that keeps relationships
while what we reveal
terminates them.

[From Partial Disclosure]

Makarand Paranjape

Routine

A dark, handsome woman, worn out with child bearing
and a wisp of a girl, in a torn frock-
they move in unison as they walk to work,
mother and daughter, sharing intimate whispers,
barefoot, tinkling anklets, at the break of dawn.
At the sound of the car, the daughter turns,
transfixed. It is a shining new sedan
and its colour hurts the eyes in the early morning light.
It passes smartly, crunching the gravel underneath.
Gently, the mother draws the child away
and urges her on to the daily routine.

[From The Used Book]

Makarand Paranjape

Separation In An Art Film

What a clatter she made
As she moved about the house,
Wracked. With sharp sounds
She worked her way through the shelves,
Disturbing his books. He stood
Still and watched as they toppled
All over the floor. She began to
To pull out her clothes, snapping hangers,
Tearing and clutching at the stuffed shelves.
The trinkets accumulated over the years,
Most of them his gifts, spilled out awkwardly,
Displaying the ravages of the years.
Then came the knick-knacks-
Perfumes, lipsticks, other women's things.
Still she moved about noisily:
What else was hers and hers alone?
These years had blurred the distinctions.
There was no way to make a clean getaway:
Stuffing everything into a suitcase,
Zipping it up smartly, and then walking out,
Triumphant, as in other movies. Here
Everything was going to be messy and painful.
Every little item, every possession, had its
Own memory, embalmed by their joint
Ownership; now each thing that had
Cemented their relationship had to be violated
Individually. And for years to come they
Would relive, in their own separate ways,
The agony of that day when they broke
Into two.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

She And He

To be a woman is to be silent and sure
To know, to be secure,
Not just about oneself but about the world,
About what's good and what's bad,
What to hold and what to void.
To be a woman is to be strong,
Not by becoming strong, not by acquiring strength:
To be a woman is to be strength itself.
To be a woman is not to speculate,
Not to know separation from the self,
Not to know death.
To be a woman is to find one's depth within oneself.
To be a woman is never to venture,
Never to stray, never to search,
But to have, as natural right,
Dominion over the earth.
To be a woman is to hold sway,
To be a woman is to be the source.

To be a man is to seek, to venture, to define-
And to find one's annihilation in woman.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Some Comic Relief at the End

Kunwar Mattu Singh, Prince of Wails,
Woke up to find he'd got the blues again.
When his courtiers cried, '_Yuvraj ki Jai ho!_'
He sighed, 'I wanna my Soju.'

Reluctantly he brushed his teeth,
Mounted his golden potty in vain,
When his scented bath was ready,
He merely pouted, 'I wanna my Soju.'

To his breakfast he was coaxed,
The table laden with his favourite dishes-
Puris and gulab jamuns among countless other sweetums and fryums;
Instead he demanded, 'I wanna my Sojlums.'

Finally, he was dressed: gold sherwani over brocade pants
Clinging to his skinny frame. The herald announced:
'_Ba adab, ba mulaiza hoshiyaar, Kunwar Mattu Singh padhaar rahe hain...'
He entered the court, declared: 'I wanna my Soju.'

Somehow the day dragged on,
Mattu Singh transacted his usual business,
But every now and then, in the midst of the proceedings,
He burst out and said, 'I wanna my Sojlums.'

In the evening, at the entertainment,
Several dancing girlies, those enchanting houries,
Tried to entice him out of his gloominess:
He frowned and explained, 'I wanna my Soju.'

At nightfall, he couldn't sleep.
Spurning the ministrations of his handmaidens,
He sulked and wept in bed:
'I only wanna my Sojulum.''

When the crown prince began to waste and pine away,
At last, Her Royal Highness and His Majesty,
Emperor of Tearland, Sighland, and Wails,
Themselves groaned, 'Give him his Soju.'

But who was this Soju?
Was she a fairy or an elf
That had stolen Mattu's heart and flown away?
Mattu Singh only reiterated, 'I wanna my Sojlums.'

So far and wide in the vales of separation
Royal messengers were dispatched to investigate:
Let's end this tale of tears, they resolved,
Let's find Mattu his Sojlums.

Will the kingdom of Wails
Like the communist parties in Eastern Europe,

Dissolve itself? Will the lovers be united?
Will Mattu Singh get his Sojlums?

You decide, gentle reader, how the tearjerker ends;
I'll only mention the bounty announced by the King's messengers:
Those who help in reuniting Soju and Mattu will attain
Success in love and life and peace afterwards.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Stone And Flesh

They were two:
Petrified, wide-eyed,
Staring straight ahead,
Neither laughing nor crying
At the daily round of worship;
Cymbals, bells, lamps, incense, recitations.
She said: Beloved,
Isn't it boring to be fixed here forever,
Neither moving nor participating in the spectacle?
When the thought issued from her mind
He became conscious of himself,
Entrapped though in stone.
In a trice,
They escaped into the world,
And were lost in its hubbub.

She wept bitterly,
Large drops rolling down her cheeks.
Again, he struck her; she screamed:
Both abused each other,
Lamenting over their loss of happiness.
Surrounding them, like the walls of a prison,
Was the humdrum sordidness of poverty:
The state of perpetual want,
The feeling, which never quite left them,
Of dreams unfulfilled, wishes unsatisfied.
And the gradual degradation that circumstances bring.

Suddenly, he awoke, as if from a nightmare:
What are we doing here, my dear?
Shouldn't we be over there,
In the consoling darkness of the sanctum?
In a flash they disappeared,
Back to their original places
Wide-eyed and squat,
Staring ahead meaninglessly:
Two stone idols.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Survivors

At the end of fifty-five or sixty years
after one has retired,
and lives quietly, in seclusion,
one's children far away,
with their own claims and concerns,
the weight of the bygone years
suddenly oppresses one
with the arrival of a stray postcard
from a son in another country:
a picturesque beach far away
evokes memories of one's childhood in a coastal village
half a century ago,
and fills the mind with an unspeakable sorrow.
The dark deserted beach
the swish of the wind
the roar of the sea
the smell of the surf
and little brown boys, playing in the sun.
The smiles and sounds come back
as if from another life.

I read father's reply and know
that I too was there-
and through many such spent lifetimes
I shall survive,
holding to my chest a millennia
of the collective memories of my race.

[From The Used Book]

Makarand Paranjape

The Bitter Half

I never liked you, remember that;
But like an miser, I clung to my faults.

If we didn't jive, I can't blame you,
It's I who had difficulties with your idea of love.

You were touchy, you were vindictive, you were self-righteous.
Yes, you not I, were in love.

I know I cannot fault you for not setting me free.
Hearts once given aren't retrieved easily.

How soon young love becomes a fetter:
When you're fast, you can't be free.

We've been together for thirteen years;
If not the best, you've given me the worst years of your life.

I can be heartless, I admit it:
It's my way of saving myself from your soft-heartedness.

They say a girl becomes a woman at thirty;
If so, after some confused rock and roll, show me how you waltz.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

The Dance

The rain-dance required prior permission from Mother.
IN the tiled courtyard in the middle of the house,
Gleefully shedding our clothes—those encumbrances—
We two brothers would assemble.
Then frisking and romping in the showers
We would yell for our neighbours upstairs
(Sisters of five and seven with rhyming names)
To join us, splashing about a great deal
To make our invitation attractive.

Then, with bated breaths we awaited the outcome
Of the artful badgering of our peers,
Considering that their father was out, and
Conniving to use the occasion
To bathe her daughters thoroughly,
Aunt upstairs would reluctantly grant permission.

I danced till my limbs failed
Or it stopped raining,
Scarcely realizing that the image of two immature girls,
Soaped from head to toe, dancing wildly,
Slowly washed by the rain to pink nakedness
Would follow me across the gulf of puberty
Into the wet dreams of an uneasy adolescence.

Makarand Paranjape

The Love Poem Unwritten

The poem he wished to write began this way:

Is it come to this
That I am reduced to writing love poems
To you....

There he stopped. A heavy onus
Of unresolved emotions
Seemed to gag him.
He wished to say:
How ironic it was that separation
Had revived their love,
How she still defined his existence
By absence, as she had once done
Through her presence;
How distance generated intimacy,
So that now they were in love again.
And how corny, how odd, how unusual that felt.
Like nothing they'd felt before,
In fact, almost like in the movies,
Their romance was beginning to dramatize itself.
Yes, this was the intoxication
Of not just being in love,
But of being in love with being in love.
He wanted to say: I love you.
I love myself when I love you.
I love what you do to me.
I love what my love does to you.
When I think of us, there's a tremor
Not in my heart, but in the pit of my stomach,
It's a dull fire that spreads upwards,
From my loins. It's a hormonal high
When I remember how we lie side by side,
Naked, and how we make love.
Unlike the past, now we don't even need foreplay.
We are so hot just being next to each other.
And we are so serene when we join,
We even talk and smile.
But as I push into you, in, in, in,
All words are stuck in the throat.
I feel myself dissolving into you,
My self sinking lower and lower,
To vanishing point.
By entering you, I give you back to yourself.
There you are, your face flushed, but calm.
And then there's neither you nor me,
But only a warmth, throbbing and vital,
Which says: Love, love, love,
Or Om, Om, Om-just the primordial note.
We look at each other like this,
And an eternity passes away
As time forgets itself.

He wanted to say:

Now that we're apart once again,
I think, how strange it is to be in love
And to write about one's love,
To write poems to you,
Telling you how much I miss you,
How I am pining away,
And yet how delicious the pain is,
How exciting, inviting, welcome.
To reinvent language to say all this
To call back to oneself the sighs and tremors
Of love, to talk of your eyes and lips,
To celebrate your face, to get lost
In your fragrant tresses, to seek refuge
In the shade of your eyelashes, to praise
The softness and warmth of your touch,
To talk of the scent of your breath,
To remember your intimate gestures,
To cup your breasts in my hands
Like two panting doves,
To nestle my face between them,
And to remember all the noises you make,
And how you clown around, making faces,
And how we invent silly names for each other...
To talk about all this and much more.
In words, words, words, to project myself at you.
Then after this burst of verbal energy, fear:
To think that the person I am in love with
Is not you, but something that I have created myself,
An image of what I love. To think that I have made
An idol of you which in my loneliness I adore.
And how such love fills me with both
Ecstasy and dread, lest you interrupt these effusions,
Breaking through the image, declaring
Your real self, shattering the mirror of dreams.
How all this fits in with the poetry reading
In which I read love poems to you,
Thus becoming a poet in love,
Wooing you with my poems,
Making public our passion,
And in the process, making you my dream, my love, my muse,
Always passive, the recipient of all this homage,
The silent deity to which the priest-poet
Lights his lamps, pouring out his devotion.
And so the recurrent fear:
It's so easy to love one's own creation,
But how difficult to love a real person.
O God, how scared I am of loving you.

He wanted to write all this,
But how awkward and unconvincing it sounded,
And a silent onus seemed to gag him.
He felt saddened at his inability to love.

He thought: being in love is easy,
But to love someone so difficult.
He wondered if he could ever love,
If there was any hope for him,
If his heart heart would melt,
If he would be saved.
How important it was to find love:
It was the perfume of existence;
And life was arid without it.
He examined himself and his own life,
His compulsions to write,
To project things, to become something else,
To alter life, to change reality,
Always the drive, the ceaseless flow of words, words, words.
And now, the onus on his heart,
The inability to write, to express
His stirring love for his own wife,
The inability to force all this into words,
The fear of being found out as a liar,
The anxiety of being exposed and branded,
The dread of discovering his own changeability,
To find out, alas, that he couldn't, didn't,
Was unable to love, to love her.

At last he wrote:
 There are those who love;
 And there are others who only write poems.
 It is you who love;
 And I only write poems.
Did he then realize
The simple release of love
And the bitter doom of having to write only poems?

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

The Magic Lantern

In the darkened room,
The improvised slide show was rigged up.
One of the walls, in pale pastel,
Served as the screen. At the other end,
Besides the bed, I was put in charge
Of the old projector. A battered cardboard box
Overflowing with slides was dumped beside me-
'There, see whatever you like...'
The others huddled nearby, pulling up
Chairs from the dining room.

You were such a chubby baby,
A real cuteums and cuddleums
Just like those fat and contented babies
On Lactogen tins. In your father's
Arms, you looked like a smug kitten,
And 'Kaka,' as you insisted on calling your father,
Himself was so handsome in his tweeds,
Almost like a film star. He had those smooth
Appealing looks.

There you are, a brat of five or six
With a mad gleam in your eyes, hair dishevelled.
Both sisters, framed in their mischief, like
Two little monkeys. No wonder, you still
Break into giggles once in a while:
You always had that lunatic fringe.

Here are a few family portraits-some common aunts
Ranged together with their babies. There's my
Mother, behind, looking very pregnant,
Yes, it was me she was carrying-
And there you are, a baby again,
Nestling in the arms of your mom.

Our parents look marvelously young and energetic,
So confident, so full of life.
And you and your cousins look grumpy and cross
Alike, as you sit on the terrace
Of your grandmother's house in Pune.

The slide show ends abruptly:
The power's failed again. I draw
The curtains aside and observe an altered world.
All your cousins are married now,
With children of their own.
I marvel at the passage of time and generations...
Are our lives going to be all that different?

Well, we had to stop reviewing the past
Before you reached adolescence. Your father said,
'Anyway, there aren't many slides of the the girls
Grown up. I lost interest, you see.

The Muse's Gift

The speed-post worked;
The poems he'd sent as her birthday gift,
Reached her on time,
And brought tears to her eyes.
That evening the phone rang:
When she said thank you,
He knew she meant it:
Her tears became poems;
His collection was complete.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

The Night By Moonlight

The night welcomed him with open arms
and gradually divulged all her plans.

A full moon, he coasted into her heart and
floated out of her dark, delighted eyes.

Gently, he brushed her roving depths,
a cheek-stroking feather of light,

a cloud floating through the air
carrying the burden of moonshine.

Intrigued, she asked him who he was
but only her shadow mocked back at her.

Suddenly, she understood: the night does
not define the moon; the moon gives shape

to the night. Content, she went limp and
gave up her plans; approvingly, he smiled.

In the morning, seeing the vacant bed,
she cried out, 'Oh, he's gone....'

But the bright sunshine revealed
that it was herself she couldn't find.

[From Partial Disclosure]

Makarand Paranjape

The Second Time Is The Best

Falling in love the first time is a dream
It's like an unanchored boat swept away at high tide:
There's no time to think or reconsider:
Venture in haste, repent at leisure.
Mud castles are not protected by walls of grit:
Before you know it the current undercuts the defences,
And in you plunge, headlong, heedless of your self.

Falling in love again and again is a recurring nightmare.
How many loves can one change?
How many false trials sustain?
Each gesture now becomes corrupt:
Hands soiled with dung, eyes degraded with lust.
You wander thirsty and starving in the howling winds
Like a lunatic lost among mirages in the desert.

But falling in love the second time is the best-
Not with anyone else, but with your first love.
That's like entering paradise with open eyes:
The gradual ascent of the sun,
The rise of nectar from the ocean,
The slow, clear, hard, and heady intoxication,
The easy sliding into throbbing ecstasy;
Ripe fruit, sweet and firm, cut cleanly, easily eaten.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

The Seven Year Itch

On a conference abroad he tried to have his fling;
But his date said instead, good luck in your married life.

He narrated a whole epic of subliminal motives and unconscious drives;
She said, relax, we haven't even begun to kiss.

He thought she would offer herself to be rejected by him.
How vain to think that any woman could be so self-deluding.

A lot of romance in two or three days, experience without responsibility;
Only men, not women, harbour such fantasies.

Like his wife she was spontaneous, small, and pretty;
But she was also virtuous and sent him back packing.

They spent so long sitting up, talking,
The next morning found them in separate beds, sleeping soundly.

When he joked about the harmlessness of little indiscretions;
The alarm in her eyes confirmed that she valued her chastity.

The bar remained open till 2:00 AM; there was gossip, then sex;
But he said his prayers as usual and went to bed at 10:00 PM.

His compatriot, who made it with the Italian chick, said he'd slept early;
He realized with dismay that without lying you can't even commit adultery.

She promised to write to him, but of course never did.
He had made no promises, but in revenge, wrote this poem.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Three Pennies of Wisdom

1

When her fright in crossing the road
made her cling to him,
he found himself praying
for the traffic to get worse.

2

By a simple stratagem
she reversed their situation:
she first designated him
as the guardian of her chastity,
and then yielded completely.

3

Nearing the gate of her hostel,
he leaned over to steal a hasty kiss
but missed her lips,
brushing her cheek instead.
'That was cheeky,' she punned
before reprimanding him:
'If you lose control of the steering wheel
we'll end up as glass, steel, blood
and twisted hearts floating down the creek.'

[From Partial Disclosure]

Makarand Paranjape

Treadmill

I thought that in sleep
All quarrels ceased,
And our minds surrendered
To the needs of fatigued bodies.
So, legs intertwined,
We huddled against the chill.
In an infantile dream,
I saw you stealing my blanket,
Meanly exposing me to the draft.
To punish you
I elbowed into your side savagely.
Still asleep,
You moaned in pain,
And called for your mother.
Startled, I awoke:
There is no respite from ourselves,
I perceived with dismay-
We carry our flawed selves into our sleep.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

Violet

She sat in her glass office
like a little bird in a cage,
slight and wispy haired.
I was a flustered foreigner
looking for a place to stay:
'You'll like it,' she volunteered,
'the food, for one, is excellent.
I can vouch for it because
I eat breakfast and lunch here.'
She looked at me kindly
and stubbed her cigarette.

Every morning on my way to breakfast,
I would pause by her office and say,
'Morning Violet,' to which she replied,
'Well, good morning. How are you today?'
Then we would make small talk
usually discussing the weather
or her health. Before leaving
I would say, 'Have a good day, Violet,'
in the newly acquired American way.

So a semester passed.
Having other friends now,
I discontinued my daily courtesy.
Once, seeing me slink past her office,
she called, and began talking excitedly
before noticing that I wasn't
particularly interested.
Then, to my tongue-tied shame
came the moment of recognition
when she perceived my indifference.
I clumsily wished her good day
but could not escape the hurt
slowly creeping into her eyes.

Having resolved never to slight her again thereafter
I again began to greet Violet faithfully every day.
On Fridays we would wish each other a good weekend,
resuming our conversations, on Mondays.
In this manner, snow-fall succeeded leaf-fall.
As the weather worsened
Violet coughed badly
complaining more than usual about her health.
I tried to coax her into quitting smoking,
but though she refrained in my presence,
the full ashtray always gave her away.

At the end of the spring semester
I moved into my own apartment.
Our parting was brief and hurried.
A few days later I saw her at the street corner,

for the first time outside her office.
She wore a blue coat, with a chiffon scarf
primly tied under her chin.
I had never realized how frail she was.
Her back was turned to me
and I was heading in another direction,
so I left her waiting there,
without exchanging a word.

Two weeks later
I was standing by Violet's glass window
anticipating the pleasure of meeting her.
Her chair was empty
as if she had stepped out for a minute:
(I half looked for the
'Will be back in five minutes' sign.)
The door opened.
An unfamiliar face advanced:
'May I help you?'
A bit unsettled, I blurted:
'Where's Violet?'

She had no family, few friends,
very little money. She lived alone;
wanted to die before becoming helpless.
Her church had started a collection
to pay for the funeral:
did I wish to contribute?

I cared for the living,
but felt no pangs for the dead.
Violet died of lung cancer.
So sudden her departure-
I was vaguely betrayed.
'She didn't tell me,' I thought,
'she went away without letting me wish her good day.'

[From The Used Book]

Makarand Paranjape

Walls

In the sultry darkened hotel room
I lost my innocence.
Our touch solidified into a wall
It separates us now
We can't scale it.
The privileged uptight seam
Eats into the warmth between your legs-
How will it feel
If I palm you gently there?
Will your thigh-stubble tickle?
You dress to tempt
To provoke undress:
The forthright curve of your waist,
The assertive thrust of your breast
Are both suspect.
You smile, cleverly
Appropriate borrowed smells.
I carry them away
Oppressed.
Within my palms your face grew cold.
We slobbered, hairs enmeshed;
Tongues turned reptiles
The saliva strung our distances with silvery tentacles.
You wiped your lips on my chest
And I turned my face away.
Still we held each other fast.
You said it was easier this way
Here was a bond
Real, palpable
Our wall
We could huddle by it.
How could every meeting be a new beginning,
How could we assay anew,
Keeping fresh vigil each time?
So, I have learnt all the cues now.
I play my part with ease
I have marked smaller spaces
In which to be myself.
There, imprisoned beyond your reach
I grope against our wall
And call for you incessantly.

[From The Serene Flame]

Makarand Paranjape

What She Taught Him

Among other things,
to be as good as possible,
and never explain oneself afterwards;
to wait, wait, wait, till it hurts
but humbly receive what's freely given;
to share as much as possible
only if he didn't regret it later;
always in love to be natural,
not planning obsessively for the future.
Never to expect the other person
to be true, even to her promises;
likewise, never to give excuses or reasons
for his behaviour with her;
never to indulge in recriminations
or be vindictive when it's over;
always, to be prepared for the end
even when so much is left unfinished;
to be grateful for what life offers,
and never push one's luck-above all,
to live with uncertainty,
and, if possible, enjoy it.

[From Partial Disclosure]

Makarand Paranjape

Wife

She came into my life
Bearing all the auspicious marks
Like, aeons ago, the daughter of the mountains did.

When I beheld her first,
She opened herself to me
Like a lotus aroused by the sun.

Her giving was so complete
That my narrow heart
Was too frightened to understand and accept her.

I treated her cruelly
Trying to prove her false,
Hoping she'd set me free.

By degrees she lost her softness
And became hard and adamant.
I raised my hand on her, but couldn't bend her will.

The battle lines were drawn,
It would be a long fight.
Even the gods stood by to watch the outcome.

As the contest began,
All my austerities paled into insignificance:
One tear from her eye tipped the scales in her favour.

My guru said
'Don't think you can get there on your own:
Without her, you have no salvation.'

Still I chafed, uncomfortable.
My love had become a yoke,
A goad with which she drove my elephantine ego.

Often, I tried to accept my lot:
My lips said all the right words,
But my cold heart did not thaw.

I looked for ways to make life easier.
Let's make a deal, I offered
Let's forget about love and settle for happiness.

Before she could spurn me,
I realized that again I had betrayed myself:
The original terms of the contract specified love.

As the years dragged on
She filled my days with unhappiness,
Stirring not an inch from her original position.

And in the beginning
It was I who had boasted
That to bear fruit, the penance must be severe.

Self-cursed, I marvelled at my loss:
How beautiful she was,
But though my own, how inaccessible.

To imagine that I had it all
And yet had nothing:
My own renunciations were eating into my heart.

What paradoxical emotions I experienced:
I hated her but when she turned her face away,
The world became a wilderness.

Hot, dry winds blew
And I roamed about like a madman,
Bereft, thirst, gasping for breath.

Truly, she was the world,
Society, life, all that made existence meaningful;
Without her I could only destroy the universe.

Elders and well-wishers watched this relationship
Baffled and frightened:
The terrific battles over trifles and unspoken assent over vitals.

With others we were the best behaved
But with each other,
Fierce critics, exacting and unforgiving.

They advised us: it looks so bad
To see you fighting;
At least behave yourself in public.

But, secretly, I felt sure:
When it looks worse than it is, there's still hope;
But when it looks good but is rotten inside, that's the end.

Thus, we were always stronger than we looked;
We always loved each other more
Than we cared to admit.

Now I have learned
That she doesn't ask for much:
With whatever is offered, nothing less than my heart.

Sometimes I make the mistake of thinking
She's only too human: she behaves as she pleases, does what she wants;
She never gives up anything for me.

But before her austerity, my renunciations
Wither like stale flowers: the woman who can be celibate
In her matrimonial bed, is verily an image of the Divine Mother.

At last in a vision I saw who she was,
Enveloped in a flood of white light,
As a divine child sporting in the empyrean.

When I looked into her mind
It was like a spring of crystal water,
Sparkling and spotless-without a speck of dirt.

To have her for wife is indeed a blessing.
Her very thought drives away sin:
She is both Guru and _Gruhini_.

So, Love, I return myself to you
As in the end of all beginnings:
I pray to you: open my heart, give me another chance.

May my words please you well,
May you open your eyes and smile,
And hold up your hand in benediction.

In you are contained all that is noble,
In you is all auspiciousness:
Health, bounty, happiness, the abundance of creation.

To make you happy is to please the gods,
To hurt you, to cause you the slightest pain,
Is to invite misfortune with one's own hands.

You are _vidya_, you are _shanti_, you are _dhriti_,
You are _keerti_, you are _rati_, you are _sati_,
So bless me-give me refuge at your feet.

And let our home resonate
With the harmonies of peace and joy
And let the earth itself flower with your benediction.

This gift of love, let us share
Like the spiritual fragrance of the yagnas of yore,
Until we disappear once more, returning to our permanent abodes.

So victory to righteousness; death to wickedness;
Peace to the denizens of the earth;
And salvation to all, from particle to God.

[From The Serene Flame]

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