

Classic Poetry Series

Sudeep Sen
- poems -

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Sudeep Sen(1964 -)

Sudeep Sen is an Indian poet and editor living in London and New Delhi.

 Life and Work

Sen studied at St Columba's School and read literature at Hindu College Delhi University. As an Inlaks Scholar, he received a master's degree from the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University in New York. Sen was an international poet-in-residence at the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh, and a visiting scholar at Harvard University.

His books include Postcards from Bangladesh, Prayer Flag, Distracted Geographies, and Rain. He has edited anthologies including: The HarperCollins Book of English Poetry by Indians (2011), World Literature Today Writing from Modern India (2010), The Literary Review Indian Poetry (2009) and Midnight's Grandchildren: Post-Independence English Poetry from India (2004). His work appears in anthologies such as Indian Love Poems (2005), New Writing 15 (2007), Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia and Beyond (2008) and Initiate: An Anthology of New Oxford Writing (2010). Sen has been translated into several languages including Arabic, Bengali, Czech, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Italian, Korean, Macedonian, Malayalam, Persian, Romanian, Slovenian, Spanish, Swedish, and Turkish.[1] Sen's writings have appeared in newspapers, magazines, journals, and broadcast on radio and television. They include: the Times Literary Supplement, The Guardian, The Independent, The Financial Times, Poetry Review, Literary Review and the Harvard Review. He has broadcast on BBC World (TV), BBC Radio, PBS, Radio Tehran and Radio Jerusalem. He has written, edited & translated over 30 books and chapbooks.

Sen has received a Hawthornden Fellowship (UK) and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize (US) for poems included in Postmarked India: New & Selected Poems (HarperCollins). He won an A. K. Ramanujan Translation Award.

Sen has directed or co-directed several short films and documentaries, including Rhythm, White Shoe Story, Woman of a Thousand Fires, Babylon is Dying: Diary of Third Street (nominated for a student Emmy Award), and Flying Home.

Sen is the member of The Plimpton Circle of The Paris Review, curator of the 'World Poetry Portfolio' series for Molossus, and serves on the editorial boards of The Literary Review, International Literary Quarterly, Orient Express and New

Quest. In 2008 he was appointed director of the Delhi International Literary Festival. In 2010, he was the first foreign co-judge for the Arvon Foundation International Poetry Competition. He is the editorial director of Aark Arts publishers and editor of Atlas.

Banyan

As winter secrets
melt

with the purple
sun,

what is revealed
is electric—

notes tune
unknown scales,

syntax alters
tongues,

terracotta melts
white,

banyan ribbons
into armatures

as branch-roots
twist, meeting

soil in a circle.
Circuits

glazed
under cloth

carry
alphabets

for a calligrapher's
nib

italicised
in invisible ink,

letters never
posted,

cartographer's
map, uncharted—

as phrases fold
so do veils.

Sudeep Sen

Bharatanatyam Dancer

(for Leela Samson)

Spaces in the electric air divide themselves
in circular rhythms, as the slender
grace of your arms and bell-tied ankles
describe a geometric topography, real, cosmic,
one that once reverberated continually in
a prescribed courtyard of an ancient temple

in South India. As your eyelids flit and flirt, and
match the subtle abhinaya in a flutter
of eye-lashes, the pupils create an
unusual focus, sight only ciliary muscles
blessed and cloaked in celestial kaajal
could possibly enact.

The raw brightness of kanjeevaram silk, of
your breath, and the nobility of antique silver
adorns you and your dance, reminding us of
the treasure chest that is only
half-exposed, disclosed just enough, barely —
for art in its purest form never reveals all.

Even after the arc lights have long faded,
the audience, now invisible, have stayed over.
Here, I can still see your pirouettes, frozen
as time-lapse exposures, feel
the murmuring shadow of an accompanist's
intricate raga in this theatre of darkness,

a darkness where oblique memories of my
quiet Kalakshetra days filter,
matching your very own of another time,
where darkness itself is sleeping light,
light that merges, reshapes, and ignites,
dancing delicately in the half-light.

But it is this sacred darkness that endures,
melting light with desire, desire that simmers

and sparks the radiance of your
quiet femininity, as the female dancer
now illuminates everything visible: clear,
poetic, passionate, and ice-pure.

□

Sudeep Sen

Choice

drawing a breath between each
sentence, trailing closely every word.
— James Hoch, 'Draft' in Miscreants

1.

some things, I knew,
were beyond choosing:

didu—grandmother—wilting
under cancer's terminus care.

mama's mysterious disappearance—
ventilator vibrating, severed
silently, in the hospital's unkempt dark.

an old friend's biting silence—unexplained—
promised loyalties melting for profit
abandoning long familial presences of trust.

devi's jealous heart misreading emails
hacked carefully under cover,
her fingernails ripping
unformed poems, bloodied, scarred—
my diary pages weeping wordlessly—
my children aborted, breathless forever.

2.

these are acts that enact themselves, regardless—
helpless, as i am,
torn asunder permanently, drugged, numbed.

strange love, this is—
a salving:
what medics and nurses do.

i live buddha-like, unblinking, a painted vacant smile—
one that stores pain and painlessness—
someone else's nirvana thrust upon me.

some things I once believed in
choosing is a choice unavailable to me.

are beyond my choosing—

Sudeep Sen

Desire

Under the soft translucent linen,
the ridges around your nipples

harden at the thought of my tongue.
You — lying inverted like the letter `c' —

arch yourself deliberately
wanting the warm press of my lips,

it's wet to coat the skin
that is bristling, burning,

breaking into sweats of desire —
sweet juices of imagination.

But in fact, I haven't even touched
you. At least, not as yet.

Sudeep Sen

Eating Guavas Outside Taj Mahal

The heavy drunken aroma
of fresh guavas
is too sweet for me to bear.

Instead, I drink its nectar
not as liquid-pulp
but as raw unsmooth fruit.

I bite its light-green rough skin
the way I used to
approach a sugarcane stalk

as a child
crunching every fibre
to extract their juice.

There are memories—
memories attached to food
and their consumption.

There are memories
about the rituals of intake—
how certain foods

are allowed or disallowed
depending on God's stance
and their place

in the lofty hierarchies
they create.
How misplaced these stations

are—God, Emperor, Man
all mistaken—proud errors
of selfhood, status, and ego.

Even under prayer's veil,
there is something about
eating guavas with unwashed

hands, tasting its taste before
masala, lemon and rock-salt
turn them into sprightly salad—

seed's bone-crack intentions
slip, cloaked—
buried before they fruit.

Sudeep Sen

Flying Home

I meticulously stitch time through the embroidered sky,
through its unpredictable lumps and hollows. I

am going home once again from another
home, escaping the weave of reality into another

one, one that gently reminds and stalls
to confirm: my body is the step-son of my soul.

But what talk of soul and skin
in this day and age, such ephemeral things

that cross-weaves blood and breath
into clotted zones of true escape.

What talk of flight time and flying
when real flights of fancy are crying

to stay buoyant unpredictably in mid-air
amid pain, peace, and belief: just like thin air

sketches, where another home is built
in free space vacuum, as another patchwork quilt

is quietly wrapped around, gently, in memoriam.

Sudeep Sen

Grammar

she has no english;
her lips round / in a moan
calligraphy of veins

— Merlinda Bobis, 'first night'

My syntax, tightly-wrought—
I struggle to let go,
to let go of its formality,
of my wishbone
desiring juice — its deep marrow,
muscle, and skin.

The sentence finally pronounced —

I am greedy for long drawn-
out vowels, for consonants that
desire lust, tissue, grey-cells.

I am hungry for love,
for pleasure, for flight,

for a story essaying endlessly—words.

A comma decides to pr[e]position
a full-stop ... ellipses pause, to reflect—
a phrase decides not to reveal
her thoughts after all—ellipses and
semi-colons are strange bed-fellows.

Calligraphy of veins and words
require ink, the ink of breath,
of blood—corpuscles speeding
faster than the loop of serifs ...
the unresolved story of our lives
in a fast train without terminals.

I long only for italicised ellipses ...
my english is the other, the other
is really english — she has no english;
her lips round / in a moan
her narrative grammar-drenched,

silent, rich, etched letters of glass.

Sudeep Sen

Jacket On A Chair

You carelessly tossed
the jacket on a chair.
The assembly of cloth
collapsed in slow motion
into a heap of cotton —
cotton freshly picked
from the fields —
like flesh
without a spine.

The chair's wooden
frame provided a brief
skeleton,
but it wasn't enough
to renew the coat's
shape, the body's
prior strength,
or the muscle
to hold its own.

When one peels off
one's outer skin,
it is difficult
to hide
the true nature of
blood.

Wood, wool, stitches,
and joints —
an epitaph
of a cardplayer's
shuffle,
and the history
of my dark faith.

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diverge,
skating along the undotted lines
of control.
A porous garland
with cracked beads
adorns Tiger Hill.
Beyond the mountains
are dark memories,
and beyond them
no one knows,
and beyond them
no one wants to know.

Even the flight of birds
that wing over their crests
don't know which feathers to down.
Chameleon-like
they fly, tracing perfect parabolas.

I look up
and calculate their exact arc
and find instead, a flawed theorem.

Sudeep Sen

Kiss

(a haiku)

a languorous kiss —
the faintest smell of ocean —
salt-lipped breeze, pleading —

Sudeep Sen

Matrix

(for psc)

Birds fly across the pale blue sky
cross-stitching a matrix in Pali—

a tongue now beautifully classical
like temple-toned Bharatanatyam.

Dialogues in the other garden
happen not just in springtime. Yet

you stare askance talking poetry
in silence, an angularity of stance

like a shot in a film-noir narrative
yet to be edited down to a whole.

What is a whole? Is it not a sum
of distilled parts, parts one chooses

to expose carefully like raw stock—
controlling patterns in the red light

of dark, a dark that dutifully dissolves.
There emerges at the end,

nests for imaginative flights to rest,
to weave our own stories braving

winds, currents, and the elements
of disguise. Fireflies in the grove

do not belong to numbered generation—
they only light up because line-breaks

like varnam keep purity alive—
enigmatic, disciplined, spontaneous.

Let the birds fly tracing angular paths,

let the dancer dance unbridled,

let the poet write unrestrained—
natural as breathing itself.

Matrix woven can be unwoven—
enjambments like invisible pauses

weave us back into algebraic patterns
that only heart and imagination can.

She walks porcupines—as you do—and
listens to the sound of the sea in a conch.

Sudeep Sen

Mediterranean

1

A bright red boat
Yellow capsicums

Blue fishing nets
Ochre fort walls

2

Sahar's silk blouse
gold and sheer

Her dark black
kohl-lined lashes

3

A street child's
brown fists

holding the rainbow
in his small grasp

4

My lost memory
white and frozen

now melts colour
ready to refract.

Sudeep Sen

and

the underside of her skin

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One Moonlit December Night

One moonlit December night
you came knocking at my door,
I took my time to open.
When I did,
there was just a silk scarf,
frayed, half-stuck in the latch.

Sudeep Sen

Prayer Call: Heat

I wake cold, I who
Prospered through dreams of heat
Wake to their residue,
Sweat, and a clinging sheet.
—THOM GUNN, 'The Man with Night Sweats'

Outside, "Allah-u-Akbar"
pierces the dawn air —
It is still dark.

Inside, electric light
powers strength
to my feverish body.

Mosque minaret
radiate prayer-calls
all around —

like coded signals
emanating
from old radio

transmitter-towers —
relaying the dangers
of heat in this stale air.

~

A bare body
sleeps peacefully
beside me —

her face's innocence,
and generous curve
of her eye

lashes, try to sweep
away my

skin's excess heat,

one that is fast
making my bones
pale and brittle.

~

A brief lull
lingers outside.
I cannot hear

the heavy lyrics,
their rhymes
trying to invoke

peace and respect,
their wafting baritone
instilling faith.

Such things
are luxuries
for me now.

I lie, trying
to piece together
the eccentric song

of my own
inadequate breathing.
It is a struggle.

~

It is also a mystery.
Mystery of a body's
architecture,

its vulnerability,
its efficient circulation —
they are perfect

models I remember
from school's
very early lessons.

They are only
how things ought to be,
not how they are.

~

Only now, I realise
the intent
of prayer's persuasion,

its seductive expression.

I also value
the presence and grace

of the body that willingly
lies next to me,
as her breath

tries to realign my will's
magnetic imprint, and
my heart's irregular beat.

My vision is awash
with salt
of her night-sweat.

My hearing is trapped
within diaphragm's
circuitous drone —

in Arabic's passion
that etches
its parabolic script,

sung loud
so that no
slant or serif

can be erased,
altered
or misunderstood.

~

Religion's veil
and chiffon —
its sheer black

and translucence,
its own desire
to give and want,

its ambition
to control
and preserve.

Such songs
mean nothing
to me

if one's own
peace and privacy
remain unprotected,

or, are not at ease.
I want
the chant's passion,

its heat
to settle
my restlessness.
I want the song
to soothe
my nerve-ends

so that the pain
subsides
and faith's will

enables to rise.

I also want
the beauty

of this faith
to raise
its heat —

not body-heat —
but the heat
of healing.

~

But for now,
the diaphanous lull
is a big boon.

Here, I can calculate
the exact path
of my body's

blood-flow,
its unpredictable
rise and fall

of heat, and
the way it infects
my imagination.

~

I step out
of the room's
warm safety.

I see
the morning light
struggling

to gather muscle
to remove
night's cataract.

~

Again,
the mosques threaten
to peel

their well-intentioned
sounds —
to appease us all.

But I see
only darkness,
and admire it —

I also admire
the dignity and gravity
of heavy-water

and its blood —
its peculiar
viscous fragility,

its own struggle
to flow,
sculpt and resuscitate.

~

In quiet's privacy,
I find
cold warmth

in my skin's
permanent sweat,
in its acrid edge,

and in my own
god's
prayer-call.

~

Sun-Blanched Blood

(for Kwame)

1

It is mid-afternoon now,
the sun streaks slant wards
through the attic's double-glazing
melting the scorched ink
in my crowded note-book
that lies blanched
on the sparse weathered table.
Hardened sepia-stained lines
that once approximated to
a flock of metaphors,
now rearrange themselves
into a congregation of phrases,
a lineation of new line-breaks:
stops that defy
even the physics of refraction,
thoughts that now re-surface
and resurrect just as
passion and reverence did
within the folds of The Prophet.

2

It is still mid-afternoon,
the blue blaze makes the pages
of my book flip over gently
in the invisible wind of silence.
The heat penetrating the glass
focuses even more fiercely
smoking out redolent similes,
questioning the whole point,
the nib of writing itself.
Underneath the permanent scar
of jet-black fluid and heat
is pulp, half-dead.
Beneath the persistent hoarse-

drone of metal-scratching
is bleached pulp, half-alive,
its cotton laid sheets
carefully encoded with
the magic arc of a gold-tip.
Words appear, and more
words. And under them all,
I discover much later,
a small spring insect
that lay mummified,
quietly crushed below
the weight of words,
its innocence and juice
trapped under oppression
of ambition and intellect,
baptised and bloodied.

3

It is mid-afternoon,
and I too lie, dead-
still, blanched, bloodied.

Sudeep Sen

Yuki

(for Bina)

In Japanese, Yuki is snow—
unmelted and poised.

She sits askance
in front of a wine-tinged door

whose paint flakes
to expose its wood-raw skin—

pale, seemingly snow-flecked.
Her hair rambles all over

her face, eyes, and neck,
as she stares shyly—

sideways into the distance.
There are secrets locked,

bolted securely
in a shut non-descript studio

in Mumbai,
tucked away somewhere

in Prabha Devi—
as the industrial estate

temporarily quietens
at the allusive

thought of snow herself.
Fantasy instils in

factory-workers, passion—
just as for me—

peeling curls of paint,

a circular chromium lock,
a rusted dis-used bolt,
and breeze that affects
a woman's hair and lashes,
inspires visions
of snow—
thaw, compassion, desire.

[inspired by a photo by Rafeeq Ellias]

Sudeep Sen

