Classic Poetry Series

Vikram Seth

- 25 poems -

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Vikram Seth (20 June 1952 -)

Vikram Seth is an Indian poet, novelist, travel writer, librettist, children's writer, biographer and memoirist.

Born and Early Life

Vikram Seth was born to Leila and Prem Seth in Calcutta (now Kolkata). His family lived in many cities including the Bata Shoe Company town of Batanagar, Danapur near Patna, and in London.

His younger brother, Shantum, leads Buddhist meditational tours. His younger sister, Aradhana, is a film-maker married to an Austrian diplomat, and has worked on Deepa Mehta's movies Earth and Fire. (Compare the characters Haresh, Lata, Savita and two of the Chatterji siblings in A Suitable Boy: Seth has been candid in acknowledging that many of his fictional characters are drawn from life; he has said that only the dog Cuddles in A Suitable Boy has his real name — "Because he can't sue". Justice Leila Seth has said in her memoir On Balance that other characters in A Suitable Boy are composites but Haresh is a portrait of her husband Prem.)

Seth spent part of his youth in London but returned to his homeland in 1957. After receiving primary and commencing secondary education at the Doon School in Dehradun in India, Seth returned to England to Tonbridge School. From there, Seth studied philosophy, politics, and economics at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where he developed an interest in poetry and learned Chinese. After leaving Oxford, Seth moved to California to work on a graduate degree in economics at Stanford University.

Having lived in London for many years, Seth now maintains residences near Salisbury, England, where he is a participant in local literary and cultural events, having bought and renovated the house of the Anglican poet George Herbert in 1996, and in Delhi, where he lives with his parents and keeps his extensive library and papers.

Seth self-identifies as bisexual. In 2006, he became a leader of the campaign against India's Section 377, a law against homosexuality.

Work Themes

A polyglot, Seth detailed in an interview (in the year 2005) in the Australian magazine Good Weekend that he has studied several languages, including Welsh, German and, later, French in addition to Mandarin, English (which he describes as "my instrument" in answer to Indians who query his not writing in his native Hindi), Urdu (which he reads and writes in Nasta’liq script), and

Hindi, which he reads and writes in the Devanagari script. He plays the Indian flute and the cello and sings German lieder, especially Schubert.

Business Acumen

Seth's former literary agent Giles Gordon recalled being interviewed by Seth for the position:

"Vikram sat at one end of a long table and he began to grill us. It was absolutely incredible. He wanted to know our literary tastes, our views on poetry, our views on plays, which novelists we liked."

Seth later explained to Gordon that he had passed the interview not because of commercial considerations, but because unlike the others he was the only agent who seemed as interested in his poetry as in his other writing. Seth followed what he has described as "the ludicrous advance for that book" (£250,000 for A Suitable Boy) with £500,000 for An Equal Music and £1.4 million for Two Lives. He prepared an acrostic poem for his address at Gordon's 2005 memorial service:

"Gone though you have, I heard your voice today.
I tried to make out what the words might mean,
Like something seen half-clearly on a screen:
Each savoured reference, each laughing bark,
Sage comment, bad pun, indiscreet remark.
Gone since you have, grief too in time will go,
Or share space with old joy; it must be so.
Rest then in peace, but spare us some elation.
Death cannot put down every conversation.
Over and out, as you once used to say?
Not on your life. You're on this line to stay."

Writing

Travel writing: From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet

His travel book From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet (1983) was his first popular success and won the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award. It offers insight to Seth as a person, who is candid about the reality and effect of living abroad — though not in particular of being in diaspora — a theme which arises in his poetry but nowhere in his fiction:

"Increasingly of late, and particularly when I drink, I find my thoughts drawn into the past rather than impelled into the future. I recall drinking sherry in California and dreaming of my earlier student days in England, where I ate dalmoth and dreamed of Delhi. What is the purpose, I wonder, of all this restlessness? I sometimes seem to myself to wander around the world merely accumulating material for future nostalgias." (p.35)

Poetry

Seth has published five volumes of poetry. His first, Mappings (1980), was originally privately published; it attracted little attention and indeed Philip Larkin, to whom he sent it for comment, referred to it scornfully among his intimates, though he offered Seth encouragement.

In 2009 Seth contributed four poems to Oxfam which are used as introductions to each of the four collections of UK stories which form Oxfam's 'Ox-Tales' book project.

Novels in Prose

The "novel in verse": The Golden Gate (Hybrid)

The first of his novels, "The Golden Gate" (1986) is a novel in verse about the lives of a number of young professionals in San Francisco. The novel is written entirely in Onegin stanzas after the style Aleksandr Pushkin's Eugene

Onegin. Seth had encountered Charles Johnston's 1977 translation of it in a Stanford second-hand bookstore and it changed the direction of his career, shifting his focus from academic to literary work. The likelihood of commercial success seemed highly doubtful — and the scepticism of friends as to the novel's viability is facetiously quoted within the novel; but the verse novel received wide acclaim (Gore Vidal dubbed it "The Great California Novel") and achieved healthy sales. The novel contains a strong element of affectionate satire, as with his subsequent novel, A Suitable Boy.

"The Golden Gate, an opera in two acts with music by Conrad Cummings and libretto from the novel-in-verse by Vikram Seth adapted by the composer" is currently (2010) in development by LivelyWorks and American Opera Projects and receives a staged workshop production at the Rose Studio at Lincoln Center in New York City in January 2010.

Works:

Novels

The Golden Gate (1986)
A Suitable Boy (1993)
An Equal Music (1999)
A Suitable Girl (2013)

Poetry

Mappings (1980)
The Humble Administrator's Garden (1985)
All You Who Sleep Tonight (1990)
Beastly Tales (1991)
Three Chinese Poets (1992)
The Frog and the Nightingale (1994)

Children's book

Beastly Tales (1991)
Libretto
Arion and the Dolphin (1994) for the English National Opera
The Traveller [2008] with composer Alec Roth. Premiere, Lichfield Festival July 2008.

Non-fiction

From Heaven Lake (1983)
Two Lives (2005)

A Style Of Loving

Light now restricts itself
To the top half of trees;
The angled sun
Slants honey-coloured rays
That lessen to the ground
As we bike through
The corridor of Palm Drive
We two

Have reached a safety the years
Can claim to have created:
Unconsumated, therefore
Unjaded, unsated.
Picnic, movie, ice-cream;
Talk; to clear my head
Hot buttered rum - coffee for you;
And so not to bed

And so we have set the question
Aside, gently.
Were we to become lovers
Where would our best friends be?
You do not wish, nor I
To risk again
This savoured light for noon's
High joy or pain.

Vikram Seth

Across

Across these miles I wish you well.
May nothing haunt your heart but sleep.
May you not sense what I don't tell.
May you not dream, or doubt, or weep.
May what my pen this peaceless day
Writes on this page not reach your view
Till its deferred print lets you say
It speaks to someone else than you.

Vikram Seth

All You Who Sleep Tonight

All you who sleep tonight
Far from the ones you love,
No hand to left or right
And emptiness above -

Know that you aren't alone
The whole world shares your tears,
Some for two nights or one,
And some for all their years.

Vikram Seth

At Evening

Let me now sleep, let me not think, let me
Not ache with inconsistent tenderness.
It was untenable delight; we are free--
Separate, equal--and if loverless,
Love consumes time which is more dear than love,
More unreplicable. With everything
Thus posited, the choice was clear enough
And daylight ratified our reckoning.

Now only movement marks the birds from the pines;
Now it's dark; the blinded stars appear;
I am alone, you cannot read these lines
Who are with me when no one else is here,
Who are with me and cannot hear my voice
And take my hand and abrogate the choice.

Vikram Seth

Distressful Homonyms

Since for me now you have no warmth to spare
I sense I must adopt a sane and spare

Philosophy to ease a restless state
Fuelled by this uncaring. It will state

A very meagre truth: love like the rest
Of our emotions, sometimes needs a rest.

Happiness, too, no doubt; and so, why even
Hope that 'the course of true love' could run even?

Vikram Seth

From California

Sunday night in the house.
The blinds drawn, the phone dead.
The sound of the kettle, the rain.
Supper: cheese, celery, bread.

For company, old letters
In the same disjointed script.
Old love wells up again,
All that I thought had slipped

Through the sieve of long absence
Is here with me again:
The long stone walls, the green
Hillsides renewed with rain.

The way you would lick your finger
And touch your forehead, the way
You hummed a phrase from the flute
Sonatas, or turned to say,

"Larches--the only conifers
That honestly blend with Wales."
I walk with you again
Along these settled trails.

It seems I started this poem
So many years ago
I cannt follow its ending
And must begin anew.

Blame, some bitterness,
I recall there were these.
Yet what survives is Bach
And a few blackberries

Something of the "falling starlight",
In the phrase of Wang Wei,
Falls on my shadowed self.
I thank you that today

His words are open to me.
How much you have inspired
You cannot know. The end
Left much to be desired.

"There is a comfort in
The strength of love." I quote
Another favourite
You vouchsafed me. Please note

The lack of hope or faith:
Neither is justified.

I have closed out the night.
The random rain outside

Rejuvenates the parched
Foothills along the Bay.
Anaesthetised by years
I think of you today

Not with impassionedness
So much as half a smile
To see the weathered past
Still worth my present while.

Vikram Seth

How Rarely These Few Years

How rarely all these few years, as work keeps us aloof,
Or fares, or one thing or another,
Have we had days to spend under our parents' roof:
Myself my sister, and my brother.

All five of us will die; to reckon from the past
This flesh and blood is unforgiving.
What's hard is that just one of us will be the last
To bear it all and go on living.

Vikram Seth

Interpretation

Somewhere within your loving look I sense,
Without the least intention to deceive,
Without suspicion, without evidence,
Somewhere within your heart the heart to leave.

Vikram Seth

Last Night

Last night your faded memory came to me
As in the wilderness spring comes quietly,
As, slowly, in the desert moves thew breeze,
As to a sick man, without cause, comes peace

[Original: Urdu, Translated by: Faiz Ahmed Faiz]

Vikram Seth

Mistaken

I smiled at you because I thought that you
Were someone else; you smiled back; and there grew
Between two strangers in a library
Something that seemes like love; but you loved me
(If that's the word) because you thought that I
Was other than I was. And by and by
We found we'd been mistaken all the while
From that first glance, that first mistaken smile.

Vikram Seth

Night Watch

Awake for hours and staring at the ceiling
Through the unsettled stillness of the night
He grows possessed of the obsessive feeling
That dawn has come and gone and brought no light.

Vikram Seth

Octet

You don't love me at all? O God. O Shit.
You still 'respect me.' Thanks. I value it
About as much as one who's asked to use
A second hat when he's in need of shoes.
Since, I discover, my own self-respect
Is quite enough to keep my spine erect
Why is it true my ample self-affection
Will not suffice to buoy me in rejection?

Vikram Seth

Prandial Plaint

My love, I love your breasts, I love your nose.
I love your accent and I love your toes.
I am your slave. One word, and I obey.
But please don't slurp your morning brew that way.

Vikram Seth

Progress Report

My need has frayed with time; you said it would.
It has; I can walk again across the flood
Of gold sil popples on the straw-gold hills
Under a deep Californian sky that expels
All truant clouds; watch squads of cattle graze
By the radio-telescope; blue-battered jays
Flash raucous squaking by my swivelling head
While squirrels sine-wave past over the dead
Oak-leaves, and not miss you_although I may
Admit that near the telescope yesterday
By a small bushcovered gully I blundered on
Five golden fox-cubs playing in the sun
And wished you had been there to see them play;
But that I only mention by the way.

Vikram Seth

Promise

I will be easy company; the blur
Of what I longed for once will fade to space.
No thought that could discomfort you will stir.
My eyes will painlessly survey your face.

Vikram Seth

Protocols

What can I say to you? How can I retract
All that that fool my voice has spoken -
Now that the facts are plain, the placid surface cracked,
The protocols of friendship broken?
I cannot walk by day as now I walk at dawn
Past the still house where you lie sleeping.
May the sun burn these footprints on the lawn
And hold you in its warmth and keeping.

Vikram Seth

Research in Jiangsu Province

Some days I feel a sadness not of grief
The shadows lengthen on the earth's relief
Salinas flows by like a silver shawl
A girl waves from the mission wall.

Vikram Seth

Round and Round

After a long and wretched flight
That stretched from daylight into night,
Where babies wept and tempers shattered
And the plane lurched and whiskey splattered
Over my plastic food, I came
To claim my bags from Baggage Claim

Around, the carousel went around
The anxious travelers sought and found
Their bags, intact or gently battered,
But to my foolish eyes what mattered
Was a brave suitcase, red and small,
That circled round, not mine at all.

I knew that bag. It must be hers.
We hadnt met in seven years!
And as the metal plates squealed and clattered
My happy memories chimed and chattered.
An old man pulled it of the Claim.
My bags appeared: I did the same.

Vikram Seth

Sit

Sit, drink your coffee here; your work can wait awhile.
You're twenty-six, and still have some life ahead.
No need for wit; just talk vacuities, and I'll
Reciprocate in kind, or laugh at you instead.

The world is too opaque, distressing and profound.
This twenty minutes' rendezvous will make my day:
To sit here in the sun, with grackles all around,
Staring with beady eyes, and you two feet away.

Vikram Seth

Song 'Coast Starlight'

Some days I feel a sadness not of grief
The shadows lengthen on the earth's relief
Salinas flows by like a silver shawl
A girl waves from the mission wall.

Vikram Seth

The Frog and The Nightingale

Once upon a time a frog
Croaked away in Bingle Bog
Every night from dusk to dawn
He croaked awn and awn and awn
Other creatures loathed his voice,
But, alas, they had no choice,
And the crass cacophony
Blared out from the sumac tree
At whose foot the frog each night
Minstrelled on till morning night

Neither stones nor prayers nor sticks.
Insults or complaints or bricks
Stilled the frogs determination
To display his heart's elation.
But one night a nightingale
In the moonlight cold and pale
Perched upon the sumac tree
Casting forth her melody
Dumbstruck sat the gaping frog
And the whole admiring bog
Stared towards the sumac, rapt,

And, when she had ended, clapped,
Ducks had swum and herons waded
To her as she serenaded
And a solitary loon
Wept, beneath the summer moon.
Toads and teals and tiddlers, captured
By her voice, cheered on, enraptured:
"Bravo! " "Too divine! " "Encore! "
So the nightingale once more,
Quite unused to such applause,
Sang till dawn without a pause.

Next night when the Nightingale
Shook her head and twitched her tail,
Closed an eye and fluffed a wing
And had cleared her throat to sing
She was startled by a croak.
"Sorry - was that you who spoke? "
She enquired when the frog
Hopped towards her from the bog.
"Yes," the frog replied. "You see,
I'm the frog who owns this tree
In this bog I've long been known
For my splendid baritone
And, of course, I wield my pen
For Bog Trumpet now and then"

"Did you… did you like my song? "
"Not too bad - but far too long.

The technique was fine of course,
But it lacked a certain force".
"Oh! " the nightingale confessed.
Greatly flattered and impressed
That a critic of such note
Had discussed her art and throat:
"I don't think the song's divine.
But - oh, well - at least it's mine".

"That's not much to boast about".
Said the heartless frog. "Without
Proper training such as I
- And few others can supply.
You'll remain a mere beginner.
But with me you'll be a winner"
"Dearest frog", the nightingale
Breathed: "This is a fairy tale -
And you are Mozart in disguise
Come to earth before my eyes".

"Well I charge a modest fee."
"Oh! " "But it won't hurt, you'll see"
Now the nightingale inspired,
Flushed with confidence, and fired
With both art and adoration,
Sang - and was a huge sensation.
Animals for miles around
Flocked towards the magic sound,
And the frog with great precision
Counted heads and charged admission.

Though next morning it was raining,
He began her vocal training.
"But I can't sing in this weather"
"Come my dear - we'll sing together.
Just put on your scarf and sash,
Koo-oh-ah! ko-ash! ko-ash! "
So the frog and nightingale
Journeyed up and down the scale
For six hours, till she was shivering
and her voice was hoarse and quivering.

Though subdued and sleep deprived,
In the night her throat revived,
And the sumac tree was bowed,
With a breathless, titled crowd:
Owl of Sandwich, Duck of Kent,
Mallard and Milady Trent,
Martin Cardinal Mephisto,
And the Coot of Monte Cristo,
Ladies with tiaras glittering
In the interval sat twittering -

And the frog observed them glitter
With a joy both sweet and bitter.

Every day the frog who'd sold her
Songs for silver tried to scold her:
"You must practice even longer
Till your voice, like mine grows stronger.
In the second song last night
You got nervous in mid-flight.
And, my dear, lay on more trills:
Audiences enjoy such frills.
You must make your public happier:
Give them something sharper snappier.
We must aim for better billings.
You still owe me sixty shillings."

Day by day the nightingale
Grew more sorrowful and pale.
Night on night her tired song
Zipped and trilled and bounced along,
Till the birds and beasts grew tired
At a voice so uninspired
And the ticket office gross
Crashed, and she grew more morose -
For her ears were now addicted
To applause quite unrestricted,
And to sing into the night
All alone gave no delight.

Now the frog puffed up with rage.
"Brainless bird - you're on the stage -
Use your wits and follow fashion.
Puff your lungs out with your passion."
Trembling, terrified to fail,
Blind with tears, the nightingale
Heard him out in silence, tried,
Puffed up, burst a vein, and died.

Said the frog: "I tried to teach her,
But she was a stupid creature -
Far too nervous, far too tense.
Far too prone to influence.
Well, poor bird - she should have known
That your song must be your own.
That's why I sing with panache:
"Koo-oh-ah! ko-ash! ko-ash! "
And the foghorn of the frog
Blared unrivalled through the bog.

Vikram Seth

The Golden Gate - I (A novel in verse)

1.1.
To make a start more swift and weighty,
Hail Muse. Dear Reader, once upon
A time, say, circa 1980,
There lived a man. His name was John.
Successful in his field though only
Twenty-six, respected, lonely,
One evening as he walked across
Golden Gate Park, the ill-judged toss
Of a red frisbee almost brained him.
He thought, "Who'd gloat? Who would be glad?
Would anybody? " As it pained him,
He turned from this dispiriting theme
To ruminations less extreme.

1.2.
He tuned his thoughts to electronic
Circuitry. This soothed his mind.
He left irregular (moronic)
Sentimentality behind.
He thought of or-gates and of and-gates,
Of ROMs, of nor-gates, and of nand-gates,
Of nanoseconds, megabytes,
And bits and nibbles… but as flights
Of silhouetted birds move cawing
Across the pine-serrated sky,
Dragged from his cove, not knowing why,
He feels an urgent riptide drawing
Him far out, where, caught in the kelp
Of loneliness, he cries for help.

1.3.
John's looks are good. His dress is formal.
His voice is low. His mind is sound.
His appetite for work's abnormal.
A plastic name tag hangs around
His collar like a votive necklace.
Though well-paid, he is far from reckless,
Pays his rent promptly, jogs, does not
Smoke cigarettes, and rarely pot,
Eschews both church and heavy drinking,
Enjoys his garden, like to read
Eclectically from Mann to Bede.
(A surrogate, some say, for thinking.)
friends claim he's grown aloof and prim.
(His boss, though, is well-pleased with him.)

1.4.
Grey-eyed, blond-haired, aristocratic
In height, impatience, views, and face,
Discriminating though dogmatic,
Tender beneath a carapace

Of well-groomed tastes and tasteful grooming,
John, though his corporate stock is booming,
For all his mohair, serge, and tweed,
Senses his life has run to seed.
A passionate man, with equal parts of
Irritability and charm,
Without as such intending harm,
His flaring temper singed the hearts of
Several woman in the days
Before his chaste, ambitious phase.

1.5.
John notes the late September showers
Have tinged the blond hills round the bay
With a new green. He notes the flowers
In their pre-winter bloom. The way
That, when he was a child, the mystery
Of San Francisco's restless spark,
It strikes him now as, through the park,
Wrested from old dunes by the westward
Thrust of the greenbelt to the slow
Pacific swell, his footsteps go.
But it is late. The birds fly nestward
Towards the sunset, and the arc
Of darkness drifts across the park.

1.6.
It's Friday night. The unfettered city
Resounds with hedonistic glee.
John feels a cold cast of self-pity
Envelop him. No family
Cushions his solitude, or rather,
His mother's dead, his English father,
Retired in his native Kent,
Rarely responds to letters sent
(If rarely) by his transatlantic
Offspring. In letters to The Times
He rails against the nameless crimes
Of the post office. Waxing frantic
About delays from coast to coast,
He hones his wit and damns the post.

1.7.
A linkless node, no spouse or sibling,
No children - John wanders alone
Into an ice cream parlor. Nibbling
The edges of a sugar cone
By turns, a pair of high school lovers
Stand giggling. John, uncharmed, discovers
His favorite flavors, Pumpkin Pie
And Bubble Gum, decides to buy
A double scoop; sits down; but whether

His eyes fall on a knot of three
Schoolgirls, a clamorous family,
Or, munching cheerfully together,
A hippie and a Castro clone,
It hurts that only he's alone.

1.8.
He goes home, seeking consolation
Among old Beatles and Pink Floyd —
But "Girl" elicits mere frustration,
While "Money" leaves him more annoyed.
Alas, he hungers less for money
Than for a fleeting Taste of Honey.
Murmuring, "Money — it's a gas! …
The lunatic is on the grass,"
He pours himself a beer. Desires
And reminiscences intrude
Upon his unpropitious mood
Until he feels that he requires
A one-way Ticket to Ride — and soon —
Across the Dark Side of the Moon.

1.9.
He thinks back to his day at college,
To Phil, to Berkeley friends, to nights
When the pursuit of grades and knowledge
Foundered in beery jokes and fights.
Eheu fugaces… Silicon Valley
Lures to ambition's ulcer alley
Young graduates with siren screams
Of power and wealth beyond their dreams,
Ejects the lax, and drives the driven,
Burning their candles at both ends.
Thus files take precedence over friends,
Labor is lauded, leisure riven.
John kneels bareheaded and unshod
Before the Chip, a jealous God.

Vikram Seth

The Wind

With no companion to my mood,
Against the wind as it should be,
I walk, but in my solitude
Bow to the wind that buffets me.

Vikram Seth

Time Zones

I willed my love to dream of me last night, that we might lie
at peace, if not beneath a single sheet, under one sky.
I dreamed of her but she could not alas humour my will;
it struck me suddenly that where she was was daylight still.

Vikram Seth

Unclaimed

To make love with a stranger is the best.
There is no riddle and there is no test. --

To lie and love, not aching to make sense
Of this night in the mesh of reference.

To touch, unclaimed by fear of imminent day,
And understand, as only strangers may.

To feel the beat of foreign heart to heart
Preferring neither to prolong nor part.

To rest within the unknown arms and know
That this is all there is; that this is so.

Vikram Seth