

Classic Poetry Series

Ranjit Hoskote
- poems -

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Ranjit Hoskote(29 March 1969 -)

Ranjit Hoskote is a contemporary Indian poet, art critic, cultural theorist and independent curator.

 Early Life and Education

Ranjit Hoskote was born in Mumbai, India. He educated at the Bombay Scottish School, Elphinstone College, where he read for a BA in Politics, and the University of Bombay, where he took an MA in English Literature and Aesthetics.

 Career

 As Poet

Hoskote belongs to the younger generation of Indian poets who began to publish their work during the early 1990s. His work has been published in numerous Indian and international journals, including Poetry Review (London), Wasafiri, Poetry Wales, Nthposition, The Iowa Review, Green Integer Review, Fulcrum (annual), Rattapallax, Lyric Poetry Review, West Coast Line, Kavva Bharati and Indian Literature. His poems have also appeared in German translation in Die Zeit, Akzente, the Neue Zuercher Zeitung, Wespennest and Art & Thought/ Fikrun-wa-Fann. He is the author of four collections of poetry, has translated the Marathi poet Vasant Abaji Dahake, co-translated the German novelist and essayist Ilija Trojanow, and edited an anthology of contemporary Indian verse. His poems have appeared in many major anthologies, including Language for a New Century (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008) and The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2008).

Hoskote has also translated the 14th-century Kashmiri mystic-poet Lal Ded, variously known as Laleshwari, Lalla and Lal Arifa, for the Penguin Classics imprint, under the title I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded. This publication marks the conclusion of a 20-year-long project of research and translation for the author.

The critic Bruce King writes of Hoskote's early work in his influential Modern Indian Poetry in English (revised edition: Oxford, 2001): "Hoskote has an historical sense, is influenced by the surreal, experiments with metrics and has a complex sense of the political... An art critic, he makes much use of landscapes, the sky and allusions to paintings. His main theme... is life as intricate, complicated, revolutionary movements in time... We live in a world of flux which requires violence for liberation, but history shows that violence itself turns into

oppression and death." Reviewing Hoskote's first book of poems, *Zones of Assault*, in 1991 for *India Today*, the poet Agha Shahid Ali wrote: "Hoskote wants to discover language, as one would a new chemical in a laboratory experiment. This sense of linguistic play, usually missing from subcontinental poetry in English, is abundant in Hoskote's work." A decade later, reviewing Hoskote's third volume, *The Sleepwalker's Archive*, for *The Hindu* in 2001, the poet and critic Keki Daruwalla wrote: "It is the way he hangs on to a metaphor, and the subtlety with which he does it, that draws my admiration (not to mention envy)... Hoskote's poems bear the 'watermark of fable': behind each cluster of images, a story; behind each story, a parable. I haven't read a better poetry volume in years."

Commenting on Hoskote's poetry on Poetry International Web, the poet and editor Arundhathi Subramaniam observes: "His writing has revealed a consistent and exceptional brilliance in its treatment of image. Hoskote's metaphors are finely wrought, luminous and sensuous, combining an artisanal virtuosity with passion, turning each poem into a many-angled, multifaceted experience." Although he was closely associated with the modernist poet Nissim Ezekiel, who was his mentor, Hoskote does not share Ezekiel's poetics. Instead, his aesthetic choices align him more closely with Dom Moraes and Adil Jussawalla.

In 2004, the year in which Indian poetry in English lost three of its most important figures – Ezekiel, Moraes, and Arun Kolatkar – Hoskote wrote moving obituaries for these "masters of the guild", essays in which he wove personal reminiscence with the editor's historic mandate of context-making. Hoskote has also written, often, about the place of poetry in contemporary culture, the dynamics of the encounter between reader and poetic text, and the role that reading circles and literary platforms can play in the process of literary socialisation.

In 2006, the prestigious literary imprint Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich launched its new poetry series, *Edition Lyrik Kabinett*, with a German translation of Hoskote's poems, *Die Ankunft der Vögel*, rendered by the poet Jürgen Brocan. The other two volumes in the series, which was launched at the Frankfurter Buchmesse, were by the renowned American poet Charles Simic and the noted German poet Christoph Meckel.

As a literary organiser, Hoskote has been associated with the PEN All-India Centre, the Indian branch of International PEN, since 1986, and is currently its General Secretary, as well as Editor of its journal, *Penumbra*. He has also been associated with the Poetry Circle Bombay since 1986, and was its President from 1992 to 1997.

 As Cultural Theorist

Hoskote was principal art critic for The Times of India, Bombay, from 1988 to 1999. Between 1993 and 1999, he was also a leader writer for The Times and wrote a weekly column of lively cultural commentary, "Ripple Effects", for it. In his role as religion and philosophy editor for The Times, he began a popular column on spirituality, sociology of religion, and philosophical commentary, "The Speaking Tree" (he named the column, which was launched in May 1996, after the benchmark 1971 study of Indian society and culture, The Speaking Tree, written by his friend, the scholar and artist Richard Lannoy). Hoskote was an art critic and cultural commentator, as well as a senior editor, with The Hindu, from 2000 to 2007, contributing to its periodical of thought and culture, Folio as well as to its editorial and op-ed pages, and its prestigious Sunday Magazine.

In his role as an art critic, Hoskote has authored a critical biography as well as a major retrospective study of the painter Jehangir Sabavala, and also monographs on the artists Tyeb Mehta, Sudhir Patwardhan, Baiju Parthan, Bharti Kher and Iranna GR. He has written major essays on other leading Indian artists, including, among others, Gieve Patel, Bhupen Khakhar, Akbar Padamsee, Mehlii Gobhai, Vivan Sundaram, Laxman Shreshtha, Atul Dodiya, Surendran Nair, Jitish Kallat, the Raqs Media Collective, Shilpa Gupta and Sudarshan Shetty. Hoskote has also written a monographic essay on the Berlin-based artists Dolores Zinny and Juan Maidagan.

As a cultural theorist, Hoskote has addressed the cultural and political dynamics of postcolonial societies that are going through a process of globalisation, emphasising the possibilities of a 'non-western contemporaneity', "intercultural communication" and "transformative listening". He has also returned often to the theme of the "nomad position" and to the polarity between "crisis and critique". In many of his writings and lectures, Hoskote examines the relationship between the aesthetic and the political, describing this as a tension between the politics of the expressive and the expressivity of the political. He has explored, in particular, the connections between popular visual art, mass mobilisations and the emergence of fluid and fluctuating identities within the evolving metropolitan cultures of the postcolonial world, and in what he has called the nascent "third field" of artistic production by subaltern producers in contemporary India, which is "neither metropolitan nor rural, neither (post)modernist nor traditional, neither derived from academic training nor inherited without change from tribal custom" and assimilates into itself resources from the global archive of cultural manifestations.

Hoskote has also speculated, in various essays, on the nature of a "futurative art" possessed of an intermedia orientation, and which combines critical resistance with expressive pleasure. At the same time, Hoskote has reflected on the place of beauty and the sublime in contemporary cultural practice, often speaking of "experiences parallel to beauty". In a major essay on the subject, he writes that "the modern art-work is often elegiac in nature: it mourns the loss of beauty through scission and absence; it carries within its very structure a lament for the loss of beauty."

In a series of essays, papers and articles published from the late 1990s onward, Hoskote has reflected on the theme of the asymmetry between a 'West' that enjoys economic, military and epistemological supremacy and an 'East' that is the subject of sanction, invasion and misrepresentation. In some of these writings, he dwells on the historic fate of the "House of Islam" as viewed from the West and from India, in an epoch "dominated by the NATO cosmology" while in others, he retrieves historic occasions of successful cultural confluence, when disparate belief systems and ethnicities have come together into a fruitful and sophisticated hybridity. Hoskote has also attended to the phenomena of politicised religiosity and reinvented belief in the epoch of globalisation, as idioms of retrieval or revival, as expressions of alternative modernities or even counter-modernities.

More recently, Hoskote, especially in collaboration with Nancy Adajania, has focused on transcultural artistic practice, its institutional conditions, systems of production and creative outcomes, and the radical transformations that it brings about in the relationship between regional art histories and a fast-paced global art situation that is produced within the international system of biennials, collaborative projects, residencies and symposia.

As Curator

Hoskote curated his first exhibition, 'Hinged by Light', at the age of 25. In his role as an independent curator, Hoskote has conceived and organised twenty exhibitions of contemporary Indian as well as international art since 1994. These include a mid-career retrospective of the artist Atul Dodiya for the Japan Foundation, Tokyo (2001) and a lifetime retrospective of Jehangir Sabavala for India's National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai and New Delhi (2005). Hoskote's exhibitions cover a range of curatorial interests, including sculptural departures from the abstract (as in the 1994 show, Hinged by Light), site-specific public-art installations (as in the 2000 show, Making an Entrance), phantasmagoria (as in the 2006 show, Strangeness), and the curve of a distinctive Indo-Iberian regionality (as in the 2007 survey exhibition, Aparanta: The Confluence of

Contemporary Art in Goa).

Hoskote was co-curator of the 7th Gwangju Biennale (2008) in South Korea, collaborating on this project with Okwui Enwezor and Hyunjin Kim.

In 2011, Hoskote was invited to act as curator of the first-ever professionally curated national pavilion of India at the Venice Biennale, organised by the Lalit Kala Akademi, India's National Academy of Art. Hoskote titled the pavilion "Everyone Agrees: It's About To Explode", and selected works by the artists Zarina Hashmi, Gigi Scaria, Praneet Soi and the Desire Machine Collective for it. The pavilion was installed in the central Artiglierie section of the Arsenale. Hoskote wrote that his pavilion was "intended to serve as a laboratory in which we will test out certain key propositions concerning the contemporary Indian art scene. Through it, we could view India as a conceptual entity that is not only territorially based, but is also extensive in a global space of the imagination." In making his selection of artists, the curator aimed to "represent a set of conceptually rigorous and aesthetically rich artistic practices that are staged in parallel to the art market. Furthermore, these have not already been valorized by the gallery system and the auction-house circuit.... The Indian manifestation will also focus on artistic positions that emphasize the cross-cultural nature of contemporary artistic production: some of the most significant art that is being created today draws on a diversity of locations, and different economies of image-making and varied cultural histories."

As Cultural Activist

Hoskote is also a vocal and articulate defender of cultural freedoms against the monopolistic claims of the State, religious pressure groups and censors, whether official or self-appointed. He has been actively involved in organizing protest campaigns in defence of victims of cultural intolerance.

Awards, Grants and Residencies

Hoskote has been a Visiting Writer and Fellow of the International Writing Program of the University of Iowa (1995) and was writer-in-residence at the Villa Waldberta, Munich (2003). He has also held a writing residency as part of the Goethe-Institut/ Polnisches Institut project, "The Promised City: Warsaw/ Berlin/ Mumbai" (2010). He was awarded the Sanskriti Award for Literature, 1996, and won First Prize in the British Council/Poetry Society All-India Poetry Competition, 1997. India's National Academy of Letters honoured him with the Sahitya Akademi Golden Jubilee Award in 2004. The S. H. Raza Foundation conferred its 2006 Raza Award for Literature on Hoskote.

oskote has held an Associate Fellowship with Sarai CSDS, a new-media initiative of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi, and is in the process of developing, jointly with Nancy Adajania, a new journal of critical inquiry in the visual arts.

Hoskote currently lives and works in Mumbai.

A Poem For Grandmother

A door. A stair. And two steps inside that dark,
the straight-backed chair my grandmother sat in,
a lace net draped across its mahogany arm.
And on the table, a volume of stories
open at the flyleaf, its tissue quill-scarred.

The photographs seal her in a shell of relations:
the sepia corset would have her no more
than an empress delegating domestic chores;
in this room, imagine her gravely accepting
tributes of porcelain and sparkling brass
or setting tiger lilies afloat in bowls, or stocking
pots of pickled mango in the attic of summer.

But the wrong word kills, and empress is wrong,
an acrid graft on a delicate stock. Empire
was never her creed: grandmother had to learn
the principles of governance from practised hands.
She had to whet the brusque words of command
on waspish crones in the inner courtyard,
had to tame the peacocks in the garden
and dry the raisins of tact with aunts-in-law,
invalids who ruled from brass-bound chests
and serene beds of illness.

She grew up with her children, kept house
in a city of merchant ships and parade-ground strife,
made a home in the rain-gashed heart
of that world in whose lanes stowaway Chinese sang
the praises of their silk, and coolies peddled
cartloads of spices plucked for colder ports.
Like the poets of that city, she wrote in two languages,
spoke a third in polite company, the lines enjambed
over the trellises, the words trapped in porous stone.

She died giving birth to a daughter
on Armistice Day, 1931.
She grew into the earth, then, a storied fig tree
whose roots shot to heaven and branches burrowed

so deep they seeded a forest.

Giving consumed grandmother. Connected to her
by nothing more substantial than a spiralled thread
of protein, I wake some nights to find her eyes
staring at me from the mirror:
grandmother when she died, younger than I am now,
cut in half by the streetlight's glare.

Hoard your powers, she says, do not give
from the core, my son, do not give.
Giving spites the flesh, corrodes intention.
Most unreliable of barterers, most memorable of sins,
giving kills. My son, do not, like Karna,
rip off the armour that is your skin.

[From: The Sleepwalker's Archive]

Ranjit Hoskote

Annotation To The Ustad's Treasury Of Verses

No poems, really, from the Ustad's middle period.
Just a few notations he'd left to brew.
Her ivory comb. A strand of wool torn free
by a trailing fingernail, redder than any gulmohur.
Jade bowls standing on a smoke-blackened shelf.
In the window, the river's spilt silver.
A tortoiseshell cat playing on the doorstep.
And, cancelled in a rage of strokes,
the grey-eyed sitarist drowning, out of earshot.

Just this broken song, suggesting he had chosen
to tarnish his rhymes with a warmer breath
than the court would permit. He sings
of his draggled woollen coat, his winters
spent in a potter's kiln, roofed in colour
by fickle skies, the river a shrivelled skin of ice,
the wildcat his one companion, the drum and blast
of rain his only music: he's begun, already, to hear
the perfect cadence beaten on the heart's shattered anvil.

Ranjit Hoskote

Canticle For A Bridge

A waver in the glass.
Heliotrope petals on the river.
He touches her drawings again.

Ten years have passed
since the bridge-builder buried his bride.
His spans are silent as rock.

but the waters echo
with the flapping of a thousand wings.
Speak to me, he says,

in one tongue only.

Ranjit Hoskote

Closing Act At The Old Theatre

It might have been simpler to break a vase
or sift the alphabet on a credulous table,
but parlour games never featured too high
on his list: the playwright comes back
only to pursue an interrupted passion
for the study of curious physiognomies.

As in life, he stands tactfully aside
for the crowds that jostle to get their seats
in the theatre; he knows the plays backwards,
it's the audience he's returned to watch,
the same carnival that he loved to savour
from the safety of the dress circle.

He thinks he's strong enough to withstand
the crush, and besides, he's invisible;
but the revellers break like a hurricane
upon the house, a thousand throats crying
in the voices of strange animals driven
by fire or flood into the wrong country.

He cracks under their stampeding feet,
plaster moist with seepage, gutters sagging,
teak panels splintering, bay windows shattering,
worm-eaten timbers crashing to the floor.
His words, when they come, are a cascade,
the sound of stones rasping on stones.

[In memoriam: Guru Dutt (1925-1964)]

Ranjit Hoskote

Dome

Dates never change
on the calendar of faith

but light and wind are playing tricks
with the past.

Words split like isotopes
in this peacetime landscape

of abandoned courtyards, empty cradles,
withered gardens and broken roofs.

Only the madman, in his garland of dried flowers,
has the right of passage here

and the blind beggar who recollects nothing
except the spider ticking in his wired skull.

For a second, between two versions
of an echo, the past doesn't happen:

the dome remains, a roc's egg
veined blue, shelled by wind.

Confess
to no crime of identity.

Wait until the guillotine falls
in the vast silence of the heart.

[for Masud]

Ranjit Hoskote

Effects Of Distance

[for Nancy]

Call it providence if the day should turn
upon its hinges, letting light colonise
this empire of jars and shutters, this room.
A telegram on the rack spells hands that burn
because you did not reply, did not realise
that some words are too proud to remind you they came.

Blue is the colour of air letters, of conquerors' eyes.
Blue, leaking from your pen, triggers this enterprise.
Never journey far from me; and, if you must,
find towpaths, trails; follow the portents fugitives trust
to guide them out and back. And at some fork,
pause; and climbing in twilight though you may be,
somewhere, address this heart's unease,
this heart's unanswered wilderness.

[From: The Sleepwalker's Archive]

Ranjit Hoskote

Fern

This feathered leaf must have fallen from the hand
of the woman who turned around to see
if her child had strayed too close to the slope
of the fuming mountain or the hunting birds,
and left her footprint in ash that hardened
to rock. A spray of seeds released that noon
remains in the thick air, and this gift:

a leaf trapped between layers of mud
that volcanic fire baked into stone:
drained of light and green, long spasm,
breath dusted with pollen, a net
of veins splayed on an altar
where the river turns in its sleep
and an old woman lights a lamp.

Ranjit Hoskote

Footage For A Tranc

The hours stop in my veins.
Evening falls, a spotted tissue
draped across dayglo streets.
The clocks go on marking
the time in another city
where the trains still run,
taking people home.

□

Over my shoulder, I see my country vanish
in a long unfurling of cornflower-blue sky.
My limbs are clear as glass.
The wind grazes my shoulders,
the animal buried in my voice
wakes up and growls.

Script thrown away, I'm on my own.
The detectives will find me
when a rainbow prints itself
on the litmus sky at noon.
I clear my throat,
the movie stops.

□

The hours have stopped in my veins
but late-night travellers rush past me,
through me, to reach the midnight express.
My country's been swallowed
by a sky darkening to cloud and sleep.
The sixty-four saints have formed a caucus
of havoc birds, the rainbow is a stanza
they refuse to sing. Close to the tympanum,
the horseshoe weather taps cryptic clues.
On every clock-face,
the hour hand and the minute hand
go on mating.

□

Wakeful, all eye, the havoc birds read
the scroll of earth unfolding,
every fleck a signal:
prey, home, danger,

hiding-place.

From a great height, each bird watches
its shadow falling
to its death.

□

I vanish, again, in the darkroom.

A lamp exposes
my heirloom bones.

On a park bench,
a gardener finds a surplice,
drooping, ravelled at the seams:
my skin, abandoned in flight.

Where I am is a boat without a pilot,
sculling through cold water.

□

Start again. There is no safety in numbers.

The sixty-four saints stand paralysed
in the authorised version of the legend.

No footnote explains the hunting songs
or the red skein curling downhill
in place of the river.

[For Shuddhabrata Sengupta]

Ranjit Hoskote

Golden Orioles

The window's aflame with sunset
but she isn't looking or really there.

She floats above the couch,
a hypnotist standing by

to catch her dreams. She's shivering,
afraid to close her eyes at night:

Will her lids burn, her images escape,
her eyes fly away, a pair of golden orioles?

The wakeful hypnotist falls asleep at last.
She drifts, the room too small to detain her.

She dreams of flying naked through the air,
unhindered by the costume of who she is.

[for Anju Dodiya]

Ranjit Hoskote

Landscapes With Saints

Mean as knives, his burnished limbs
rotted and stank when the gateman came
to call his number. Gorakh forgot
his body was just a borrowed suit,
one size too large.

*

He's forgotten the river pilot's song.
He's above parrot gossip,
beyond the hawk's warning cry.
Wrapping himself in the torn fabric of sky,
Kabir climbs on.

*

Dropping his nimbus in the grass, he looks
at the boats riding the stream below:
close enough to touch.
When the road ends,
Tuka takes a deep breath and leaps.

*

She sees a boatman rowing in sand,
shielding his skiff from the ocean's roar.
Such a safe harbour, brother, sings Lalla,
it saves you the trouble
of charting your course.

*

His eyes would not rest on a quatrain of walls
and scanned the desert air instead:
mango trees balancing on their heads;
himself, Khushru,
a bird of paradise judged by earth.

*

Neglect leafs through his pages. Perfumes escape
from phials left unstoppered
on his shelves. Lead crumbles
in Attar's mind; his hands,
wherever they rest, touch gold.

*

A torn cotton robe against the wind;
his limbs, nettle-pricked, transparent as prayers.
His name burnt out,
Milarepa sings to himself
as he travels the centuries.

Ranjit Hoskote

Madman

He stares up at the dying stars,
this madman in a soot-black robe.
No door opens to take him in,
this madman in a soot-black robe.

He dips his pen in a darkened pool
that breaks his nib:
it's only the shadow of a cloud
that's passing above
this madman in a soot-black robe.

His long walk is a chase of leaves
through a park spelled out in leaf-stripped boughs
that offer him no roof,
no respite from the flickering snow:
he hides his chin in a threadbare scarf,
this madman in a soot-black robe.

Or is he the shadow of a cloud
that's passing above a darkened pool?
He breaks his nib in a chase of leaves,
shuffling below the threadbare boughs,
testing his will against the snow
that flickers in the narrow beam
from a window half-opened to the night.

But no door opens to take him in,
he stares up at the dying stars.
His turn will come, he strops his knife,
this madman in a soot-black robe.

Ranjit Hoskote

Milarepa

A crust of mountain for breakfast
with a smear of dew to wash it down,
a torn cotton robe against the wind.
His name burnt out, Milarepa sings to himself
as he travels the centuries.

Ranjit Hoskote

Miniatur

On the staircase, a courtier sprints in slow motion.
At the window, the princess combs her long, long hair.
In the courtyard, wolves devour her discarded lover.
Under the roof, a page trembles at the snarling and cries.
In the mirror, the foot of the painter's easel
shows he's still there, holding his breath,
recording the gleam of early morning sun
on crystal and goldleaf,
echoing, in the rosy tint of apples,
the blush mantling the cheek
of the royal bride.
He knows where to paint the curtain.

Ranjit Hoskote

Mirror

Lightning hits the mirror and the people it holds.
Their silhouettes fall to the floor,
wisps of silver foil.

Alone on the wet marble,
you tap the empty glass and listen
for an echo.

Ranjit Hoskote

Nazm

Our lives are voices in two heads.
The rest is background music.

§

In this city of high walls, the scores of abandoned music
flutter in the streets and my torn-out Aztec heart
comes to rest, a blind girl's paperweight.

§

Blindfold palmist, you've stitched our hands together,
completing accounts that the waking mind abandoned
to the faultless needlework of dream.

§

We lie embroidered on the mimosa.
I need no gauge of motives to tell me
why it has rained.

§

Clouds darken the windows, the lamps are lit.
You carry the incense from room to room.
I flare briefly, then go out,
a lamp you lit and forgot to trim.

§

Raw colours grate against the mind's palette.
The mirror promises only the dark.
The eyes that have glowed would rest on the mirror,
smoky lamps afloat on a clouded stream.

§

Forget the star maps of the Old Kingdom.
Dress yourself in night.

Trust me:
our hands can see in the dark.

[for Nancy]

Ranjit Hoskote

Quietus

Silence is clean, a frigate leaving a harbour
with no siren wailing.

Silence is a tureen that needs no scouring
for the last stains of grammar.

Silence is fire,
a threat with no reprieve.

Silence is a panther
that stalks us through jade eyes.

Ranjit Hoskote

Shaman

I am outside the mystery, the boy thinks,
his eyes frozen on the lilac cloud

that hovers above him, the backcloth apricot sky
soundless. The cloud's wings beat low,

tousling his hair, wetting his eyes,
opening his mouth. After it has melted

in rain, in thunder, this cloud, the boy
will find it again, veined and marbled on his tongue.

Ranjit Hoskote

Shore Leave

The sea floods your canals, heaves at your gates:
inside you, our child learns the sail-maker's art.

Ranjit Hoskote

Speaking A Dead Language

I trespass on sentences that ash has muffled,
the lichen overgrown; then re-ignite tropes
that farmers dropped in their kitchen grates
with the husked corn and blue glass beads
when the northmen rode in on champing roans.

Hindsight is a poor cousin to revelation.
Listening to the hiss and splatter of rain,
the crackle of fire between the words,
voicing my breath in strange shapes of mouth

is like looking for you.

The north-rose flowers in every direction
on the tattered map I pull from a chest,
a hidden magnet
around which iron filings frame a crown.

I flatten the continents on a table
and read there of our love,
not lost but translated,
its cadences learned again
in other countries by other tongues.

[From: The Sleepwalker's Archive]

Ranjit Hoskote

The Archaeologist At Noon

Despite the perfection of the reflected sun
which burns the water that holds it

Despite the perfection of the bullet-holed clock
that spoke its last twelve and turned to stone

Despite the perfection of the pause between a cabbage
and the shadow it casts on the grey-tiled floor

Despite the perfection with which the creeper's roots
dig below the rock on which the house stands

You search for your true name, scrabbling in grass
that's drying to nothing in the perfection of the sun's gaze

Ranjit Hoskote

The Empire Of Lights

after Magritte

This house has not moved a brick since midnight.
Outside the front door, the streetlamp has brushed
the cobblestones with a moss of delay: the night
glows in a yawn between darkness and day.

The street flows on, soaking the canal
with brittle afterimages of rain.
The bats that have chased butterflies of meaning
up the crescendos of trees all night

are drowsing in their green and icy silhouettes.
It is night here still, it will always be night:
this street is wound up tight to strike
at 3 am and hiss a breath of doubt

into waxy clouds that are talking softly
about the ninja maestro who bled the clock dry.
They remember the day he parted the curtains
and broke the windows with his flame-coloured hands.

They are whispering about the jacarandas
that he drowned in the sky beneath the house
that has not moved a brick since midnight,
and how well cotton burns at noon.

Ranjit Hoskote

The Hotel Receptionist's Confession

What could I do? I trusted them and they let me down.
They'd shamble in, flashing gawky legs, waving bony arms.
Or shuffle in crab-wise, bow-legged, too short
to sit at table. And there I was, thinking how poised
they'd be, how diagram-perfect, walking on air.

Believe me, it gave me no pleasure to tailor them to fit,
no pleasure at all. Imagine the horror of breaking ankles,
chopping hands at the wrist, stretching ligaments
until they snapped, or trepanning a slice of skull.
I had to do it all. But it was worth every minute, it was.

You have no idea how beautiful and transparent
a little blood makes the world, how perfect.
And how else could I have got them
to lie in comfort on my flawless bed?

Ranjit Hoskote

The Invention Of The Senses

Touch crosses the small distances of this room,
caressing a pebble, smoothing a ruffled curtain.
When you rest your hand on this ebony table,
a book floats to the surface, opens to page one.
Run your fingers along the paper, the edge, the spine,
and a lamp begins to glow faintly in a corner.

Touch unlocks the closed and private cells:
unlike the voice, its ends are not gregarious.
Searching alone, it brings home what you've lost:
open your hands in a shallow fan
of ten fingers, and a door clicks open,
a child looks through.

[for Masaki Fujihata]

Ranjit Hoskote

The Murder Of The Genie

Deep scar, the ash-white day
brands itself on lavender walls.
The gulls strike deep
in crane territory.
A clock ticks in a robot's head,
mindful of its destiny.

The fan spins till the breeze begins
to slap the blinds. In the squeeze between
iris and lid, the window feels
the first stir of unrest.
Who let the assassin spirit in?
Who armed him, who bailed him out?

He must have rehearsed his catgut lines
before putting on his ski-mask,
turning the doorknob.
An inkpot drops in a sailor's head,
a letter comes to rest
in the cradle.

The mullions framing the gantry
ten miles away by skiff
are phantoms of mutiny
but don't show it.
They hold their dignified pose.
Nothing connects.

A parrot ransoms the clock for a song.
They repeat each other faithfully, translate
as two chiming alibis.
The curtains shush the piercing needle
of the chime; the flash-gun springs
from behind a wrinkled tiger mask.

The curtains catch fire
even as the grammarian gropes
for crucial evidence, signs of a struggle
in the thick undergrowth of prescribed tropes

and the flowering false pretences
of language.

In the tanglewood, I leave a few odd cinders,
the spoor of a maple, the trace of a tune,
an eyeful of pale water,
my guillotined feet.
Draw and quarter fact.
Fight clues with clues.

This wisdom shall be proverbial
in the room's unforgiving folklore.

(In memoriam: Rene Magritte)(1898-1967)

[From: The Sleepwalker's Archive]

Ranjit Hoskote

The Orientalist

He went back to drafting policies of state
but never forgot the courtesan in the Sanskrit play.
She wrote him letters on pages folded
in triangles like betel leaves
but did not wait for the beloved and spring;
creepers soothed her, her lamp-lit hours passed
among the scented shadows of lovers.

Ranjit Hoskote

The Postman's Last Song For The Moon

You glide in plain view, gravity's nearest slave,
floating outside our windows, just out of reach,
an ice fruit we'd love to pluck
from the sky's jet branches.

What stops us is we know
the tides would roar and lunge, break their contract if we did:
wall-high waves rushing houses and stores, vaulting over gates,
an army of madmen dancing on drowned asphalt.

Rain-wrapped, fog-tangled, how easily we forget
oceans that have dried and shrunk
to ravines where the eye never settles,
the heart now never goes. Like the Sea of Tranquillity:
so wildly utopian we gave it to you,
tattooed it on your skin's acceptance.
Safe behind glass and our chartreuse curtains,
we watch it float by on full-moon nights and smile.

The mortgage of our nights and days is so quickly claimed.
You measure breath in the centuries it takes
to carve a pensive ellipse through space.
Messages conveyed, you dip below mouldy clouds
or submit with reluctance to an eclipse,
never more than half deciphered.
You keep your dark side hidden as you shine,
a riddle orbiting in the wide-open eye.

Sickle of the harvest, lantern of our last rooms!
Green moon of January nights,
you'll bark at our windows,
a dog begging for a bone
long after we've gone.
Other voices will wake up to answer:
survivors from the minefields of sleep,
they will pelt you with curses, extradite you to memory.

[for Jeet Thayil]

The Soloist Performs With An Orchestra Of Eevents

[for Ranbir Kaleka]

The greenest things happen when you're not looking:
creepers braid themselves around a bridge,
clouds surround a tower, nudge it towards a dead end
and neon measures the length of the cobbled street.
There's no one to hear you read, clearly it's time
to jump off the mind's cold waterfront

and follow the dolphins, whose dance lasts as long
as a notched breath, the naked spasm of a thought,
the yanking away of a hand. You could miss it
so easily and freeze. Is that you or a cut-out
parked in your chair? How wise to plant a proxy:
the greenest things happen when you're not there.

Ranjit Hoskote

To Name A Sea

Honour the translator,
survivor of cadence:

struck by lightning,
he lives to tell the tale.

Rudderless, no mast:
he steers the boat of tomorrow

across a sea that has no walls.
Dip a seine in its water, you cannot hold

the water. By what name
shall we call its cresting blues?

By what name
shall we haul it in?

Strophe upon strophe
they strike us, the waves.

Ranjit Hoskote

To The Sanskrit Poets

Leave something behind: a trace of cloud
on a plate, a pair of white birds

shot by a hunter, an emerald brooch
that a shrub snatched from a princess in flight

or the archer's last prayer, spoken minutes before
his brother's arrow found his throat.

Leave us these threads to unravel, embroider:
secret messages inked in white

on white beneath the unsettled weeks
of postcards and air letters

that jam the mailbox while we're away.
Leave us the jigsaw of previous lives.

Ranjit Hoskote

Travelling Light

Eat slowly. Read what you can by available light.
Take nothing with you
except the sky stencilled in the window

to picture the next stage in this journey
that will carry you past the poplars of home,
past scrub and palms to the unyielding sea.

And when the train stops at the last beach,
forget the harmony of the spheres
that you thought to find in hard things and fluent.

Put your bag down and look
at the reef that gashes
through the ocean's tablecloth

and the meteors that light up
the moon's silences.

[for Baiju Parthan]

Ranjit Hoskote

Vigil

Lover, listening at the keyhole,
married to a whisper on the phone,
the rustle of a dress.

How many rivals he has shot
across the hedges
of sleepless nights.

Hiding behind the arabesques
of the mirror, scarf knotted tight
as his breath, conspirator.

Ranjit Hoskote