

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Gieve Patel**  
**- poems -**

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# Gieve Patel(18 August 1940 -)

Gieve Patel is a poet, playwright and artist, as well as a practicing doctor.

## <b> Early Life and Education </b>

Gieve Patel was born in 1940 in Mumbai. He was educated at St Xavier's High School and Grant Medical College. He lives in Mumbai where he is a general practitioner.

## <b> Career </b>

His poetry works include Poems than first launched by Nissim Ezekiel followed by How Do You Withstand, Body and Mirrored Mirroring. His plays include Princes, Savaksa and Mr Behram .

He held his first show in Mumbai in 1966 that went on to have several major exhibitions in India and abroad. Patel participated in the Menton Biennale, France in 1976. India, Myth and Reality, Oxford in 1982; Contemporary Indian Art, Royal Academy, London belongs to that avant-garde grouping of artists based in Bombay and Baroda.

He has also exhibited for Contemporary Indian Art, Grey Art Gallery, New York, 1985, Indian Art from the Herwitz collection Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts, 1985 and 'Coups de Coeur' Geneva, 1987.

He has been conducting a poetry workshop in Rishi Valley School for over a decade. He also edited a collection of poetry which was published in 2006.

## <b> The Poet of the Body </b>

Gieve Patel is considered to be the poet of the body since human body is a recurrent theme in a majority of his poems. In his poems, the body acts as a living metaphor. His sympathies are with the oppressed or down-trodden and anyone devoid of his basic right to live. In an appropriately titled poem, The Ambiguous Fate of Gieve Patel, he being neither a part of Hinduism nor Islam in India, he grieves the isolation faced by the Parsis in the starting line of the short poem based on communal riots, when he writes; "To be no part of this hate is deprivation". As a Parsi observer, he cannot choose to be a part of either side, he poignantly remarks, "Planets focus their fires/into a worm of destruction/Edging along the continent. Bodies/Turn ashen and shrivel. I only burn my tail." He is

thus counted among the well-known Parsi writers in India.

# Evening

Our English host was gracious  
We were soon at ease;  
Or almost:  
The servants  
were watching.

[From: Poems; Publisher: Nissim Ezekiel, Mumbai, 1966]

Gieve Patel

# Forensic Medicine

Text Book

A case in point, the expert says;  
A woman thrust glowing faggots  
Where properly  
Her son's sparrow should nest.  
Puerile in-law practice, he says,  
But good as any other  
To set the story rolling; begin  
With a burn in the sparrow's nest  
To extend over all therefrom emerging  
Fan and flourish of the world:  
Hold the foetus tumbling through,  
And before it may express  
Surprise at a clean new blast of air,  
Lay subtle finger over mouth and nose.  
Watch it blue.  
If rather you would be coarse, go ahead,  
Use rope and hatchet, knife, stone, bullet,  
All you would on the more aged;  
Bodies whose gel of blood and skin  
Have not exchanged years against sweet air  
Will not relinquish with ease.  
Against these devise infinite means,  
The pictures in my book will instruct.  
Change vantage point inch by inch  
To discover them all: recall grace  
Inherent in each new part, find  
Weapon against it. Lop off limbs.  
Smash teeth. Push splinters  
Underneath nails and lever them  
Off fingers; offer acid in a drink of wine,  
The house of song is blasted. Soft skin  
That clothes the gentlest dunes will retract  
Before knife and bullet. Proceed.  
Flick pages. The regal column of the neck  
Upholding the globe of sight and sound  
Is often undermined; or straight  
Charge at speech and sight, chop off tongue,

Gouge eyeballs out, hammer nails into the ear.  
When you have ravished all, missing  
No entrail, do not forget  
To return where you started: with a penknife  
Strike at the rising sparrow's neck;  
With ends of twine strangle the orbs  
That feed him seed;  
And outrage the sparrow's nest.

You are now full circle  
With nothing  
Not thought of, not done before.

[From: *How Do You Withstand, Body*; Publisher: Clearing House, Mumbai, 1976]

Gieve Patel

# From Bombay Central

The Saurashtra Express waits to start  
Chained patiently to the platform,  
Good pet, while I clamber in  
To take my reserved window seat  
And settle into the half-empty compartment's  
Cool; the odour of human manure  
Vague and sharp drifts in  
From adjoining platforms.  
The station's population of porters,  
Stall-keepers, toughs and vagabonds relieve themselves  
Ticketless, into the bowels of these waiting pets;  
Gujarat Mail, Delhi Janata, Bulsar Express,  
Quiet linear beasts,  
Offering unguarded toilets to a wave  
Of non-passengers, Bombay Central's  
In-residence population.

That odour does not offend.  
The station's high and cool vault  
Sucks it up and sprays down instead,  
Interspersed with miraculous, heraldic  
Shafts of sunlight, an eternal  
Station odour, amalgam  
Of diesel oil, hot steel, cool rails,  
Light and shadow, human sweat,  
Metallic distillations, dung, urine,  
Newspaper ink, Parle's Gluco Biscuits,  
And sharp noisy sprays of water from taps  
With worn-out bushes, all  
Hitting the nostril as one singular  
Invariable atmospheric thing,  
Seeping into your clothing  
The way cigarette smoke and air-conditioning  
Seep into you at cinema halls.  
I sink back into my hard wooden  
Third-class seat, buffered by  
This odour, as by a divine cushion.  
And do not suspect that this ride  
Will be for me the beginning of a meditation

On the nature of truth and beauty.

[From: *Mirrored, Mirroring*;

Publisher: Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1991]

Gieve Patel



# God Or

God or  
something like that  
shot  
through each part of you, down  
to your  
small fingernail, well into  
pits and wells  
you  
did not know of, beamed  
right into all of that,  
and into your  
crude meanness,  
and your fruitlessness; flooded  
might be  
the word for  
it;  
trans  
lucence, the sun  
blaz  
ing through, lift  
ing the most of you  
out  
of sight, save for  
a persistence  
of veins.

[From: *Mirrored, Mirroring*; Publisher: Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1991]

Gieve Patel

# How Do You Withstand, Body?

How do you withstand, body,  
Destruction repeatedly  
Aimed at you? Minutes,  
Seconds, like gun reports  
Tattoo you with holes.  
Your area of five  
By one is not  
Room enough for  
The fists, the blows;  
All instruments itch  
To make a hedgehog  
Of your hide. It's your fate,  
Poor slut: To walk compliantly  
Before heroes! Offering  
In your demolition  
A besotted kind of love:  
Dumb, discoloured,  
Battered patches; meat-mouths  
For monsters' kisses.

Gieve Patel

## It Makes

It makes sense not  
to have the body  
seamless,  
hermetically sealed, a  
non-orificial  
box of incorruptibles.  
Better shot through and through!  
Interpenetrated  
– with the world. Air  
mists my lymph. Ex  
cretion, degrading  
routine,  
gives the world passage.  
I am a bead.  
Sorted,  
thumbed,  
threaded,  
strung,  
fingered (did you say) by  
threads of all hues,  
riddled through,  
happily.

[From: *Mirrored, Mirroring*; Publisher: Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1991]

Gieve Patel

# Old Man's Death

There may be a very small comfort  
In knowing yourself finally  
Useless – when even grandchildren  
Have grown beyond your love,  
And your would-be widow  
Has outhobbled you and  
Wont be around to break with  
One or two of her last thick tears,  
And not caring much for  
Your fellowmen, the doctors  
Wont get your body –  
To know how simply you  
Will be bundled away, startling  
A lifelong friend who finds  
He cannot mourn  
At the quick and easy changes:  
A sprinkling of water,  
The disappearance of an odour,  
A turn of bed-sheets, leaving  
A bed, a chair,  
Perhaps a whole room,  
With clarity in them.

[From: Poems; Publisher: Nissim Ezekiel, Mumbai, 1966]

Gieve Patel

# On Killing A Tree

It takes much time to kill a tree,

Not a simple jab of the knife

Will do it. It has grown  
Slowly consuming the earth,  
Rising out of it, feeding  
Upon its crust, absorbing  
Years of sunlight, air, water,  
And out of its leperous hide  
Sprouting leaves.

So hack and chop  
But this alone wont do it.  
Not so much pain will do it.  
The bleeding bark will heal  
And from close to the ground  
Will rise curled green twigs,  
Miniature boughs  
Which if unchecked will expand again  
To former size.

No,  
The root is to be pulled out -  
Out of the anchoring earth;  
It is to be roped, tied,  
And pulled out - snapped out  
Or pulled out entirely,  
Out from the earth-cave,  
And the strength of the tree exposed,  
The source, white and wet,  
The most sensitive, hidden  
For years inside the earth.

Then the matter  
Of scorching and choking  
In sun and air,  
Browning, hardening,  
Twisting, withering,

And then it is done.

(From POEMS, published by Nissim Ezekiel, Bombay 1966)

Gieve Patel

# Poem

What is it between  
A woman's legs draws destruction  
To itself? Each war sees bayonets  
Struck like flags in  
A flash of groin blood.  
The vicious in-law  
Places spice or glowing cinder  
On that spot. Little bird-mouth  
Woman's second,  
Secret lip, in-drawn  
Before danger, opened  
At night to her lover.  
Women walk the earth fully clothed,  
A planetary glow dispelling  
The night of dress,  
A star rising where  
Thigh meets belly: target spot  
Showered  
With kisses, knives.

Gieve Patel

# Post Mortem

It is startling to see how swiftly  
A man may be sliced  
From chin to prick,  
How easily the bones  
He has felt whole  
Under his chest  
For a sixty, seventy years  
May be snapped,  
With what calm  
Liver, lung and heart  
Be examined, the bowels  
Noted for defect, the brain  
For haemorrhage,  
And all these insides  
That have for a lifetime  
Raged and strained to understand  
Be dumped back into the body,  
Now stitched to perfection,  
Before announcing death  
As due to an obscure reason.

[From: Poems; Publisher: Nissim Ezekiel, Mumbai, 1966]

Gieve Patel



# Public Hospital

How soon I've acquired it all!  
It would seem an age of hesitant gestures  
Awaited only this sententious month.  
Autocratic poise comes natural now:  
Voice sharp, glance impatient,  
A busy man's look of harried preoccupation -  
Not embarrassed to appear so.  
My fingers deft to manoeuvre bodies,  
Pull down clothing, strip the soul.  
Give sorrow ear upto a point,  
Then snub it shut.  
Separate essential from suspect tales.  
Weed out malingerers, accept  
With patronage a steady stream  
Of the underfed, pack flesh in them,  
Then pack them away.

Almost,  
I tell myself,  
I embrace the people:  
Revel in variety of eye, colour, cheek, bone;  
Unwelcome guest, I may visit bodies,  
Touch close, cure, throw overboard  
Necessities of distance, plunge,  
Splice, violate,

With needle, knife, and tongue,  
Wreck all my bonds in them.

At end of day,  
From under the flagpole,  
Watch the city streaming  
By the side of my hands.

(From HOW DO YOU WITHSTAND, BODY published by Clearing House, Bombay, 1976)

Gieve Patel

# Squirrels In Washington

Squirrels in Washington come  
Galloping at you in fours, then brake  
To halt a few feet away  
And beg on hindquarters.  
No one stones them,  
And their fear is diminished.  
They do halt, even so,  
Some feet away, those few feet  
The object of my wonder. Do I  
Emit currents  
At closer quarters? Are those  
The few feet I would keep  
From a tame tiger? Is there  
A hierarchy, then, of distances,  
That must be observed,  
And non-observance would at once  
Agglutinate all of Nature  
Into a messy, inextricable mass?  
Ah Daphne! Passing  
From woman to foliage did she for a moment  
Sense all vegetable sap as current  
Of her own bloodstream, the green  
Flooding into the red? And when  
She achieved her final arboreal being,  
Shed dewy tears each dawn  
For that lost fleeting moment,  
That hint at freedom,  
In transit, between cage and cage?

(From *MIRRORED, MIRRORING* published by Oxford University Press, Madras, 1991)

Gieve Patel

# Urban

the old crone  
slurping up  
essence of chicken  
soup  
    as though  
it were chicken soup  
itself, mis  
taking the hum in  
her veins  
for the ima  
gined chicken's part  
ing gift  
    while  
I know it to be  
                no more  
than hot  
water's mo  
mentary warming,  
                and how mo  
mentary when even naked  
flame would howl  
and wiggle  
an in  
    jured fing  
er, frost  
bitten, coming  
too close  
    to the  
waft of de  
    parting chill.

[From: How Do You Withstand, Body; Publisher: Clearing House, Mumbai, 1976]

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