

Classic Poetry Series

Robin S Ngangom
- poems -

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Robin S Ngangom(1959)

Robin S Ngangom is an Indian poet and translator from Manipur, North Eastern India.

Biography

Robin Singh Ngangom was born in Imphal, Manipur of North Eastern India. He is a bilingual poet who writes in English and Manipuri. He studied literature at St Edmund's College and the North Eastern Hill University Shillong, and serves as a Lecturer in the Dept. of English at NEHU. He is the Editor of New Frontiers, journal of the Northeast Writers' Forum, Guwahati, and is Nominating Editor for Manipuri for Katha Translation Awards, New Delhi.

He was conferred with Katha Award for Translation in 1999, was invited to the UK for the UK Year of Literature and Writing, 1995, and the Udaya Bharati National Award for Poetry, 1994.

His significant publications are Words and the Silence, Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 1988, An Anthology of New Indian English Poetry, Rupa & Co., New Delhi, 1993, Time's Crossroads, Disha Books, Orient Longman Ltd., Hyderabad, 1994, Khasia in Gwalia, Alun Books, Wales, 1995, A New Book of Indian Poems in English, Writers Workshop, Calcutta, 2000, Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from the Northeast, NEHU Publications, Shillong, 2003, Confronting Love: Poems, Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 2005, The Desire of Roots, Chandrabh'g!, Cuttack, 2006

His work has been featured in The Telegraph Colour Magazine, Calcutta; Debonair, Bombay; Chandrabh'g', Cuttack; Kavya Bharati, American College, Madurai; Poetry Chronicle, Bombay; Poiesis, Bombay; Indian Literature, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi; The Brown Critique, Maharashtra; The New Welsh Review, Wales; Kunapipi, University of Aarhus, Denmark; SWAG Magazine, Swansea, Wales; New Statesman & Society, London; Planet: The Welsh Internationalist, Aberystwyth, Wales; Verse, University of Georgia, Athens, US.

15 August 2008, Northeast India

Having lost my independence
How could I celebrate it
Though I've sewn flags on cockeyed schooldays?
Margins are superfluous in the big centre's book
Although memory is not silent and speaks up at times.

Now the periphery (of which I'm also a guilty part)
Is scrawling a unique history on delusive margins,
Mischievous like a collage by brawling painters.
Once lebensraum has sunk to pogroms
The periphery can kill too
And then deal cards on the peace table
Or hoist a nation's flag in driving rain.
On the continuum of farce
It doesn't matter if we're moving forward or backward
Or if a government is serving rats on its menu,
The morning passes with a prime minister orating
From the ramparts of a fort,
"Make the borders irrelevant," he said over a year ago.
But then "military factories would close
And fence makers would have nothing to fence in or out".
It never occurred to him to disguise himself and ask
The man on the street of his unhappiness.
It seems we are preparing for happiness tomorrow
At the price of misery today.

On the road outside shut down by insurgents
Aimless now in its nonplussation
Trees and lamps are breathing fog and a light rain.
This day passes between surfing for news of the outside world,
Statistics of farmers committing suicide on the weaver belt
And the poor waiting for paper to translate into bread
And 50 years of discrimination festering in the periphery
With another anniversary of murder and disappearances.

I've been told that I live on the edge
By intellectuals who also teach me
The history and politics of far away countries.
I have to take their word on faith, being so unread.

I don't know if I'm shallow with little inner life.

I try not to book a flat in the city of the sky
But meditate brokenly on love and its players
Although it gave me a terrible fright the other day,
I had silenced her shame with my mouth
And remain a freeloader of passion and its web.

Robin S Ngangom

After 'jashn-E-Azadi'

(a film on Kashmir by Sanjay Kak)

The kite transforming into smoke lacing
The chinars is not a symbol.
The rose has migrated from the garden of paradise.
Freedom will never come
Poured into goblets waiting to be raised,
Martyrdom is a handout from god the hagiographer.
Only poetry of ruins is real.
The incoherent rose still blooms
From some beloved breast torn open.

Robin S Ngangom

BODY

Because I couldn't examine it from close quarters
Like Burton with his magnifying glass
I worshipped it from afar.
The body is never free of the human condition
And either weeps or sings, or becomes restive
If denied bacchanalia or tragedy.
Time is not its enemy as Ovid would have it
But the mind with its dark pledges.
If you kick it as Descartes demonstrated
It reacts violently, for it isn't the soul which replies
But flesh and bone with their
Entire moral and philosophical apparatuses.
The body is the key to Adam's children,
Heathen matter that mystics want to defeat.
Serial killers want to destroy it
As it often turns up in court as witness,
Rapists in uniform want to reduce it to pulp
Because it conceals intimate evidence,
Poets want to disembody it to elegize fallen man.
But the body is the sum of its parts,
Sever an organ but the tongue takes over,
Remove a hand and the foot starts painting,
Deny eyes and fingers are already on the keys.

Robin S Ngangom

FLIGHT

The warning disguised as a message
came before the village was up and about,
and when they left
they didn't carry pots or blankets
or even machetes.

As they went to the outpost of guardians
they left chickens running in the yard
and the dog lazing on the steps.

Flights like theirs
Do not have destinations,
And only once did they wish for wings.

The taste of the herd will return them
To dark and dingy towns where
They will sell used clothes, wild meat and herbs.
The most vulnerable will sell bodies.
Because in spite of the land mines
They still shared limbs.

Words like "the end of history"
Will not resonate anywhere in their lives.
They do not have meat and drinks left
To offer to embedded scribes. As before
Their fates will go unreported, arousing
Only a shred of curiosity somewhere.

Robin S Ngangom

Funerals And Marriages

I've stopped going to funerals and marriages.
Any public demonstration of grief or joy unnerves me.
Solemnity withers me and I hate being genteel with a
pinstripe and noose around my neck. It is not that
I've forgotten acts of kindness or to wish
people happiness if they can find it anywhere. I
would, if I could, help the bereaved furtively after
the mourners have eaten and left. I have become truly
unsociable.

I don't know why anyone would like to be
comforted by anybody except people they love
selfishly. You only need hugs and kisses from people
you've known intimately, people from whom you
can exact a price. I cannot be comforted, except by
the woman I love illicitly.

I often wonder about the efficacy of marriages and
funerals. Could it be because others are as worried,
as I was during my own wedding feast that my friends
and guests would not show up for some strange reason?
As regards funerals, I know that if the house of the
dead cannot keep a demonic hold on me my absence will
really not make any difference. But I do not want to
be censored for not attending marriages or funerals. I
wish people would not invite me to weddings or bring
news of an old acquaintance's death. If I could
I wouldn't attend even my own funeral.

I remember the day I returned home, and without even
seeing my father I went to my aunt's house when
I heard my cousin had died during my long absence. I
tried to match my aunt's grief by trying to show
some tears in my eyes but only ended up sniffing like
a dog. After that, my cousin's sister, my other
lovely cousin, in whose body I first sang a liquid
tune with my tender mouth, gave me pineapple to eat
and we smiled at each other. I used to dip my hands
into her blooming breasts, a pair of frightened

pigeons. But later, my dead cousin appeared in my dreams to play and protect me again as he did during our childhood. He took a long a time to go away and I had to spit three times to be sure that he doesn't haunt me.

I remember this film about slum-dwellers in Bombay and how after the tears and the burning they would bring out their bottles of orange liquor and get drunk and have a real ball. That's one funeral I would like to attend.

Robin S Ngangom

Hill

Hill, you and I have seen
only upheaval since our birth.
When I was torn from the universal womb
I echoed your silent cry.

You have been carved by time as I am.
From your forests grow flutes
oracular drums and nymphs.
The ancient ones still speak of the time
when the gods, tired of the heavens
descended to earth, and with sensual fingers
and primeval clay, moulded your torso and breasts.
They also scooped the clouds
and poured them over cliffs
to fashion your silver hair.

With subterranean instincts
you have seen habitations, and
generations of children come and go.
When you descend in green bends to the townfolk
you bring garments of fog, rural baskets
of mushrooms, wildflowers and birds.
Until one day I died and took new birth
in your legendary woods.

During the festive season
when the cold gathers holly leaves, and
lips of boys and girls meet again in benison
I was lonely with you but heard your voices:
horns in the distance and maidens
and wild horses whinnying.

Hill, you have preserved from decay
hearts like mine,
faltering forward in absurd death.
And it should be.
Clouds come home when they find you.

Houses (After Cavafy)

We believe we own them but
In the evening of a street not a soul will be found.
Only a few stars shuffling in the oily sky and
Orange trees for neighbours.
Here, they've lain huddled in December waiting
For Christmas to rock them on its pinewood floors
And in blue afternoons
You can see them drowsing in the barber sun.

Relentlessly, a dream has hemmed me in these hills
While the future has cast me as a bleak interpreter of signs.
And so many things to finish
That I did not pay any attention to their birth,
There were no labour pains,
And they have shut me off from their hearths.

Robin S Ngangom

LAST WORD

What kind of a poet is he, they ask.

I said: "I am a poet of earth and space,
possibly water, but not fire. I know
my limitations, and there are many things
between earth and sky I cannot name.

I have an ancient desire for understanding,
meaninglessness frightens me.

That is why I love simple things
such as sunlight on our shoulders,
or women with firm breasts
and hills quiet in the rain."

They whispered among themselves:

"How come his poetry is riddled with bullets then?"

So I said:

"I wanted my poems to exude a heady odour
but only the sweet taint of blood
or burning flesh emanates from my poem."

Then they said:

"His poems are always falling from arrogant heights."

I answered:

"I've always wanted to see them fall
like leaves which turn beautiful before they die."

But they said:

"When they fall his poems would shatter
because he drops them on stony ground."

I only said:

"I wanted them to fall like pebbles
into a pool. I'm sorry I always break
my words on hostile surfaces."

Finally they said:

"That is why his poetry is guarded.
He courts death and freedom but his words
need protection by an armed escort.
He could not speak and allowed
muteness to bind his heart.

This is the origin of his fear."

Robin S Ngangom

My Invented Land

(after Mario Meléndez)

My native soil was created from tiny sparks
that clung to grandmother's earthen pot
which conjured savoury dishes
I've been looking for
all my life in vain.

My homeland has no boundaries.
At cockcrow one day it found itself
inside a country to its west,
(on rainy days it dreams looking east
when its seditionists fight to liberate it from truth.)

My people have disinterred their alphabet,
burnt down decrepit libraries
in a last puff of nationalism
even as a hairstyle of native women
have been allowed to become extinct.

My native place has not been christened yet
my homeland, a travelogue without end,
a plate that will always be greedy
(but got rice mixed with stones)

My home has young people
who found their dreams in a white substance
and the old that transplanted their eyes,
it has leaders who have disappeared
into their caricatures.

My home is a gun
pressed against both temples
a knock on a night that has not ended
a torch lit long after the theft
a sonnet about body counts
undoubtedly raped
definitely abandoned
in a tryst with destiny.

Robin S Ngangom

NATIVE LAND

First came the scream of the dying
in a bad dream, then the radio report,
and a newspaper: six shot dead, twenty-five
houses razed, sixteen beheaded with hands tied
behind their backs inside a church . . .
As the days crumbled, and the victors
and their victims grew in number,
I hardened inside my thickening hide,
until I lost my tenuous humanity.

I ceased thinking
of abandoned children inside blazing huts
still waiting for their parents.
If they remembered their grandmother's tales
of many winter hearths at the hour
of sleeping death, I didn't want to know,
if they ever learnt the magic of letters.
And the women heavy with seed,
their soft bodies mown down
like grain stalk during their lyric harvests;
if they wore wildflowers in their hair
while they waited for their men,
I didn't care anymore.

I burnt my truth with them,
and buried uneasy manhood with them.
I did mutter, on some far-off day:
"There are limits", but when the days
absolved the butchers, I continue to live
as if nothing happened.

Robin S Ngangom

POEM FOR JOSEPH

"It is never too late to come home."
But I need a homeland
where I can recognize myself,
just a map or even a tree or a stone,
to mark a spot I could return to
like a pissing animal
even when there's nothing to return for.

Although it's true
that in my native land,
children have crawled out of burrows
they had gouged under hard beds,
long after the grownups had fled and
roofs came apart
like charred heads.

You said, you didn't regret
how ethnic cleansers had palmed
your newly-built home off on a people
well on their trail back to pure blood,
you didn't mind leaving behind
objects of desire
you had collected over twenty-five years,
or, how you came to live in a rented room
with your wife and your children
in dog-eat-dog Imphal,
among the callous tribe
I call my own.

Only the photographs you mourned,
the beloved sepia of one family tree,
since you're the reason why your fathers lived;
but, who'll believe now
that you lived at all?

Robin S Ngangom

POET

Why do trees weep leaves without warning?
Why do the old choose to die in their mountain hamlets?
Why did his people turn to terror?
Why does love tie him down?
How is he a poet if he's afraid to look for answers?

Robin S Ngangom

Poetry

A sleepless night, a lovelorn night, and
poetry arrived silent, to console
my wounded being.

It said, never mind the song,
never ming the lovers and
your dreams. Thus it left me,
where it found me.

It led me by the hand to its threshold,
and dared me enter its haunted house
of mirrors, alone.

And the first reflection I saw,
was my naked shame, my empty hands,
and a lifetime of silence.

And I saw my self-selected pain,
the entire history, unveiled
by memory and thirst. I saw
my happiness, against a backdrop,
which is sadness.

And then I knew, I can neither live
nor hate. And the last reflection I saw,
was my naked shame, my empty hands,
a lifetime of silence

May 1985

Robin S Ngangom

Primary Schools

I remember only the detritus of schools
which taught fear,
where only nuns seemed to believe
in the power of the written word and punishment.
There was a boy in the middle of it all
who once forged his father's signature
in order to dodge a maths test
and spent the whole day in a World War II cemetery
sleeping between roses and epitaphs.
The intimidation of books from Glasgow
made him steal small notes and coins from his father
which admitted him to a mystic circle
of titbits, cannabis, and adult tales
far away from pink rooms and uniform handwriting
or 'eena meena maina mo' by rote
after clambering walls that grow glass-creepers
to the freedom of cork trees and frogs and egrets,
a stinking marshy world of catapults and running noses
which grappled with black polished shoes
and moral science, to return home
on cloudy evenings brewing storm-fuelled nights
exiled on a reed mat and only a hurricane lamp
with slate, chalk, and as the years grew up
inkwell and bamboo-pulp paper
were the keepsakes of his childhood.
There were mosquito storms and
cool dirt floors polished with cowdung and clay,
ruined walls and lizard myrtles and moss
which reminded elders of neglect
near a big water tank left behind by British soldiers
where vipers came to drink, and
gaudy walls of goddesses.

I can see the naïve boy
who couldn't read the dirty word
spelt on the ground by his older friends
in the calligraphy of randy boyhood,
and, later, obsessed with that moist idea
explored his girl cousins fervently.

There were long delightful, convalescent afternoons
of illustrated classics without
the stress of the school bus when he heard
only the sleepy clang of hammers
in the nearby smithy, when life burnt slowly
like calories even when he was sleeping,
without the solemnity of anyone's life
coming to an end.

Robin S Ngangom

The Ignominy Of Geometry

The ignominy of geometry,
the inability to evade angles and parallels.
Living, we have to suffer that mortification
which robs the sacrifice of joy
much of its sheen.

One minute of patronizing certainty
and the boring man is a 'square'
but when our understanding's poor
someone's off on a tangent,
and that dark excitement we all secretly envy
is an eternal triangle,
or, when two people cannot agree (naturally)
they are diametrically opposed,
bowing again to geometry,
a language of precision
to measure our imprecise lives.

We were given a white emptiness
and left to our devices. Wanting more from life than
mere life
we tried to fill that emptiness with lush pigments,
beauty, purpose, a finishing touch of children.
We went looking for subjects in time and space
creating moments under cherry-trees, lifting glasses
to youth,
but merely fulfilled the oracle of repetition
and then we speak of a wheel coming full circle.
The ignominy of geometry,
the inability to see beyond centres and triangles.

Even my love was flesh and blood
because I had put my mouth on her lips
but good fortune abandoned us
and we became two tiny points of light
on that white emptiness
drawing unhappy parallel lines.

TO PACHA

To your uneventful death, Pacha,
the stones hurled at your demented name,
and the doors closed on your life
it is fitting that none mourn
the face of your memory they slapped;
from booze artist Pacha, to lunatic Pacha.

There are no more tears to shed
in this withered country where they
kill pregnant women and children; its
nipples have long gone dry, and leering
death walks your homeland. And why should
anyone weep for your lonely alcoholic end?
Young boys and soldiers are butchering each
other by the dozen, in the hills, the angry
streets, day after day, and too many heroes
and villains are not worth remembering at all.
Death is callous, Pacha, in the land of your
innocent birth.

Consummate madman, unknown comrade,
you were the best of them all;
whether you mapped the geography
of your stricken town, pen dipped
in your drunken blood, or portrayed
old men hard of hearing. Breaking heart
of roots, savage lover no woman would tame,
existential hero and fiercely proud pauper.
You laughed yourself insane in the teeth
of the gathering storm.

Hovel-dweller amidst concrete and iron,
anachronistic mendicant, and embracer of
manuscripts in pounding rain, angry star
which burned in our skies, what were
your dreams? Reveal them a little for me,
anonymous brother. Poetry in your
homeland must die a natural death
when one must "sew up his lips and

clog his ears with mud," and to be a man, first of all, you must sell yourself to the highest bidder.

Immaculate madling with resplendent dreams,
you refused to sell them in your land
where villains strut as the pure in streets.
You only said: "One's homeland is dear. I
have not seen all of this land. I have not
been able to tread the grass that grows there."
For a long time the tramps and lunatics
beckoned you, and only they shall
honour your name.

Robin S Ngangom

Writer

A writer can survive without a car
but a window with his palm
feeling the breath of a street
or a garden, a few weeping pens
and clean sheets are indispensables.
He can live with the moon
as his eastern neighbour or with pines,
cantankerous mynahs or even factories.
As of now freedom of expression
would mean for him
expression of freedom.
For example, the word 'clitoris'
would be as exhilarating as uttering:
'the revolution is a farce.'
He would have continued:
'The ophthalmic optician
shut down his clinic
after far-sighted revolutionaries
came for a free checkup.'
But that wouldn't sound aesthetic
even though it's the truth.
He hates himself for having to utter
the ugly things and even his
bold words would seem prudish
in free worlds.
This is what clings to him
even in exile,
the reality about freedom
which led to his exile.
He would have pursued
the more beautiful words,
skies, dances, images, discourse,
trees, nudes, illumination,
if he possessed the gift
of being free

Robin S Ngangom