

Indian Selection: poems
Akros, 2000

India and Scotland are entwined like a Kashmir shawl round my life. The knot cannot be unravelled but can uncoil like a snake, start up like the brain-fever-bird that disturbs any chance of rest.

MY INDIAN SELF

Let me be
myself my
Indian self
that goes to extremes
from garland to ashes
Himalaya to desert
mango to maize

Let me wear the silks
the sandals and the gold.
Let me dip my fingers
in the bowl of desire
even here in the puritan
corners of my dwelling

Let me reclaim
myself; I cannot
be curtailed;
extravagance is my form
not my style;
intensity is how
my pulse is rated

My body is myself
however ageing;
I love the way it has borne
with me all these years
and given nothing less
than life itself to others

Happiness is tropical and
love is a house with wide verandahs.
Joy is my element:
I pass it through the test
of water, fire, air
and bring it back to earth

SET LOOSE

A company of long grey snakes
slides through child-high grassland
near Bangalore. The grasses roll
like waves but when the snakes
have passed they stand undamaged.

Children slept veiled in mosquito-nets
and on the ceiling a fan slow-whirled.
A cobra was coiled where I stood
to open the skylight, untwisting
a thin cord to let in the Indian night.
It had entered by the water-sluice
where bathtubs were emptied. Why did men
rise up from their string beds to kill it
then and there and cover it where it lay?

They came early to bury it next morning
in case a dog should eat it and fall dead
(as if they cared about the life of dogs).
It was a ritual: snakes must be killed
even while they sleep, innocently coiled.

Now I am disentangling the ropes
that open the sky, while men
and children sleep. Now I take up
the coiled serpent with its crushed head
and set it loose to ripple through the fields.

*The rains seem to be over and our sitting room is uninhabitable for heat again and
our bedroom wall is dotted like wallpaper with bloody mosquito corpses.*

– From Murree

BURDEN

Elephants of polished teak, ivory tusks,
carved by Indian *mistri* cross-legged in the dust,
wrapped in his *chadar* and carried to the station,
spread out the platform to catch the dulled eyes
of British families travelling in May
to the hills, or returning in September
after the Monsoon . . . a few annas thrown.

The craftsmanship is perfect and detailed:
one elephant pulls and the other pushes
a log of teak as big as themselves.
Mighty civil servants, the leader takes the strain
and the other puts his weight behind the task.
The white man's burden? Elephantine
to build and bridge, to heal and teach,
to manage and manufacture,
to transport and distribute.

Ships brought them to a bitter post-war Britain.
They settled as they could in villages and suburbs,
market towns and terraces, but on their mantelpieces
teak elephants were still and still at work.

Passed on to the children who had played with them
from house to house, the tusks now loose,
the burden was inherited along with carpets,
silver, jewelry.

All I have is from India
of my parents. Surrounded by it I live
far from it. Chained to the log I cannot move.

*The worst was the car drive from Lahore in the heat. I'd forgotten how bad the
roads are and how slowly we have to go. I'd also forgotten how dusty the dust is,
how dark the house, how hard the floors.*

– From Sialkot

INDIAN WOMEN AT WINDERMERE

Indian women at Windermere
why carry plastic buckets and pans
stooped and bending low
when you know
how to sail along like swans
your loads aloft as head-gear?

Oldish women in walking-shoes,
saris, coats and spectacles,
with wealthy westernised sons
Indians
living in modern bungalows –
how much of yourselves have you had to lose?

If I were you I would wish to be

inconspicuous yet walking tall;
no slavery
to nationality
whether in Britain or Bengal –
head high and both hands free.

Today it's blissful – only 80F, but the day we arrived [in Sialkot from Murree] – at 9pm at night, the bus having come late in the morning, very exhausting and hot and filthy – and the last three days have been grilling. Meg woke the first morning a mass of prickly heat (heat rash). The first two days were ghastly. She couldn't sleep and cried and cried. Needless to say the cupboards were full of either rats or white ants and it was a beastly job cleaning up. The silverfish have been at the books.

– From Sialkot

FADED INDIAN BEDSPREAD

My faded Indian bedspread
threadbare and washed out
I would not exchange
for a luxurious quilt

With ancient flowering pattern
and cotton endurance
to another generation
its workaday presence

GOING NOWHERE

Travelling to Kashmir
the delectable mountains
five days journey
through the burning plains

At Delhi a telegram
her little girl was ill
she turned back home
turned away from the hills

And I see those who give
up on promised lands
turn back because they have
the present on their hands

Did I tell you about the High Commissioner? He was late because his car couldn't come up our muddy road. They started mending the road last year when the foreman had a stroke. Twenty bags of wheat came today to be distributed at the Welfare Centre. I gave the girls' club a talk on Jeremiah in Urdu!

– From Sialkot

THE DHOBI'S DOG

*Dhobi ka kutta na ghar ka na ghat ka
(The washerman's dog belongs neither to house nor riverside)*

The dhobi's dog will return from riverbank in the sun
to the house, but not lie down; to and fro he'll trot
panting, semi-wild, hither and thither recalled,
never petted, fondled, either hot or cold.
Does he belong? To whom? Dhobi-ji sends him home,
Bibi-ji won't give him room. Such is my lot.

Born and reared in India, comforted by ayah
on some cool verandah of lofty bungalow
with charpai and degchi, decanter and serahi,
enervated, dusty, the whining mosquito,
black ants and red, huge fans overhead:
when all was done and said, the British had to go.

In Scotland I froze: hands, feet, nose,
in thick uneasy clothes at dour boarding school:
a wind-resistant, dismal, stern, redoubtable,
grey-stone-wall life exemplified by rule;
embarrassed to embrace, weep, laugh, kiss:
was I of this race? from such a gene pool?

I lived in Pakistan, land of the Mussulman,
governed by the Koran. I learnt Punjabi,
dressed in shalwar, travelled to Lahore,
joined in zabur, lived on dal-chapati:
but didn't my passport say 'British, born Bombay'
however long my stay in Sialkot or Karachi?

I like the way I speak, the voice my thoughts make,
yet Scottish folk are quick to think me English.
I've lived here (sixty) years (Anderson forebears
and Glasgow Macalisters – that's buksheesh!)
Still my language finds no place, no ethnic dress or face:
I plead my special case and thus I finish.

IN PRAISE OF THE WORLD, THE FLESH AND THE DEVIL

Order of the snake: on the silver chalice
twines a tree as handle, with climbing serpent.
This my christening present, my Indian birthright,
sacred religion.

World our home, our habitat, where we shelter;
world we love as mother and father, giving
breath and substance, all that sustains the human.
Earth is our Heaven.

Flesh the seamless garment that clothes our person
binds us, pairs us, keeps our identity and
makes a holy trinity through relations:
born of each other.

Jesus teaches love of our enemy and
love of neighbour equal to love of self, but
self includes the shadow within; poor devil
needs our acceptance.

Fruit and river, god of the olive garden;
nothing can destroy our redemptive working
close to earth, yet spiralling upward; serpent,
sign of our wisdom.

We had a difficult week with the water pump broken and therefore hand pumping and shortages. I've had a nice time visiting in the 'busti' (shanty town) nearby. The Pakistanis cheer me up whereas the rich only depress me.

I'm worried about Roland [baby son born in Karachi] who's just skin and bone and has obviously lost weight over the last two months which you don't notice till it's happened. I suspect he's got dysentery but the labs are so unreliable here. All in all we're terribly glad to be leaving soon. [After three years in Karachi.]

I look very old. I have been reading a biography of Florence Nightingale. Here is a wonderful excerpt: 'From committees, charities and schism, from the church, philanthropy and all deceits of the devil, Good Lord deliver us!' It's incredible the opposition she faced from petty officials and government authorities.

– From Karachi

WITH GRATITUDE TO INDIA

I was a baby in India
born among dark eyes and thin limbs
handled by slim fingers
bounced by bangles
and held high among the turbans,
surrounded by the light sari
black knot of hair
suggestion of spice,
wrapped up only by those songs
that spiral the spirit out of the dust
and lay it down again to sleep.

I crawled among bright toenails
ticked off ants by the gross
or touched the lizard in his cold quickness;
toddled past wilting bougainvillea
to watch hoopoes on the mai-dan,
caught flashes of minivet, oriole and bulbul
and peered up into huge flowers
on tree after tree
as I broke into their shade.

Never left with a strange
babysitter
I was part of the parties, parades,
the bazaar,
could swallow the stench and listen
to the poetry of bargaining;
heart's desire was to drink cool water
or chew a sugar-cane
and flap off the flies.

I had dysentery, sickness, paleness
boiled buffalo milk,
no welfare vitamins, no plastic pants.
The sun was a fiend, the rain was a friend
the stars only just out of reach.

Expressions were always changing:
a smile latent in sorrow
and a love in anger;
tears happened with laughter
but patience presided over every mood.

To have first found the world
in abundant India
is my life's greatest privilege.

We're in the midst of a dust storm and hot dry weather. It soared up from a maximum 88 to 104 within a day. We still have no air conditioner. Roland and Hilda have had malaria and been ill and very fractious and wan with temps up to 104. Both have had a three day course of pills and are better but won't let me out of their sight, or eat. Hilda asked for a grapefruit yesterday and got a little worm in her mouth. She spat it out and more or less had hysterics as a result and won't sleep except beside me.

Meg, when tired and depressed, cries for you: 'If only I could see Granny. I love her best in the world.' As I feel the same it's difficult to comfort her!

Sometimes I think Roland is too good. When I take him out, especially, he's an angel. I went to Drigh Road Colony (shanty town) to give the children Christmas cards. They are building a new church there out of their own contributions with a brick wall around and a large verandah for their services. Meantime we had the service just among the rubble inside the wall. There is smallpox in Drigh Road. They're all in a state and one baby has died and two children are very ill. I begged them to bathe the children in soda-bicarb but they are terrified of bathing when ill. The result is the kids are in torment with itching and heat.

– From Karachi

BUDDHA IN EUROPE

The Buddha of Healing has come to the centre of Europe
from Japan, *Le Buddha guérisseur*,
master of remedies, with his wand to dispel fear.
A thousand years ago he was carved in cypress
wood, one hand raised, palm outward
to save us all from torment of existence, fingers
tenderly curved as if to touch and gather
cries of suffering, and to transmute
them into another song, another silence of being
nothing or no-thing or no tied-up bundle
of private passion, attachment, craving, death.
On his left hand lightly rests a jar of ointment,
panacea for illusion. His eyes are closed
and yet I know they really take me in
as I stand before him in Brussels and bow to his reassurance.

A thousand years surviving in cypress wood
an ancient woman prays, her lips tight with grief
and Mother Teresa ailing in Calcutta
watches over the dying, a mendicant for ever brimming over.

The Dalai Lama is given the prize for peace
in the year the Chinese murdered their own success,
peace of great price, the kind the people pay for.

Tibetans fled their homes on the heights of Earth
and brought among us their golden way of being
human, neither in haste to resist nor to forgive,
but waiting with a gesture that banishes fear
of no-good devils, however efficient.
The Dalai Lama is Buddha-Nature made manifest,
and the pearl of peace he prizes shines on his brow.

The Buddha of Healing is here in the heat of Europe.
He attracts to his palm the silent cries
of our century, offers salve of enlightenment.
It is only a tiny jar and yet if we open it
carefully – for how can there be enough to go round? –
we find it empty, a begging bowl, or a shining pearl.

RECUMBENT BUDDHA

At Pollonnoruwa Buddha lies
light behind his veiled eyes
asleep in heavy stone yet most awake
lotus and impenetrable lake:
compassionate smile
immobile
but dancing in a whirl of energies
conflict caught in secret harmonies
movement in rock, solidity in sky
renunciation locked with liberty.

Teaching the memsahibs Urdu! All unwitting I took on a class started by the British Women's Association. There are eighteen students (some married to Pakistanis) in two classes. Now they are busy preparing to act a play in Urdu, that I composed of useful phrases and idioms, for a finale to the year. Being enough interested in Pakistan to want to learn a little Urdu, they are all delightful people and a ready pool of would-be helpers for other projects. One is determined to help with immigrants in Britain when she returns. One, a nurse, comes with me every fortnight to the Drigh Road Colony to do some medical aid. Another helps to teach the sweeper-woman to sew clothes for their children. Another is leading off a discussion group for those who are discontent with 'measuring out their life in coffee-spoons' while their husbands discuss or run businesses. So the links are being formed.

– From Karachi

QUESTIONNAIRED

'Tell me again – the name of your wife,
her age both now and when you were married,
children – alive, dead or miscarried,
the name of her father and your mother,
everyone's sister and anyone's brother;

what did you say was the name of your wife?
Is she second or was she the first?
Did she speak what had been rehearsed?

Income tax – how many dependants?
We'll have to make a few amendments
to previous statements now denied.
Did you declare what you couldn't hide?

By the way, what's the name of your wife?

Is this your present or your previous life?

*'Sir, I have told you, I tell you once more:
I still have the one wife I had before.
It's not a question of reincarnation,
simply a matter of immigration.'*

Dream or nightmare, this is my life
as I mouth
 the sounds
 of the name
 of my wife.

A ghastly grey sunless cold day today and the children both woke at 5am. I've had three bad nights. One of them we went with other missionaries to Ben Hur from 8-12 midnight. It was very exciting but not terribly Christian. I'm utterly sick of missionary's Christianity anyway: none of them enjoyed the film at all except me. I feel tired, depressed and wish I could come home for Christmas!

*Did I tell you I had a Tagore poem from Gitanjali about babies translated into Urdu and written out in beautiful script and pinned up in the Welfare Centre?
– From Sialkot*

WESTERN PURDAH

She is veiled in children:
no-one can see her.

Her eyes reconnoitre
through the grille of twisting, childish fingers;
delicate sandals walk the path of wifeliness;
hands emerge, ringed in capable motherhood.

Folds of material hide her:
on one side those she fetches for lunch,
on the other those she carries in the evening;
the morning is pleated with housework
and covers thickly her whole back.
Head and neck are invisible,
swathed in all the times she can't recount
what she was doing.

No-one can find her:
lovers cannot reach
nor statistics pry into;
committees cannot drag her out
nor friends fuss around;
relations do not stay long;
the burquah is ready at night
to put on like a dressing-gown
whenever someone wakes.

Terribly now, after twenty years,
the purdah is removed in sudden gashes;
for the first time she is uncovered
when youth has withered.

But Allah is merciful even to western mothers:
age itself will conceal us
until we take the ultimate veil.

TO MY SON GOING ABROAD

Abroad is the place to be in this world.
It is where we were born
and is always where we are heading.

This island is but one landing stage
on the passage-lines of the world
that voyagers know as they come to harbour.

To settle here is to nestle among the familiar
but you would explore.

You will meet subtle webs of thinking:

people who gather your thoughts
before you start to explain.

They will know your feelings too
and uncover words in their languages
for those we have hopelessly left unnamed –

and so you'll explore yourself
in that great abroad,
in heat and height and dirt and disease
and in the abundant nakedness,
revealed, of primeval earth
and its stark fragility.

If you lose your soul to explore the world,
the world will restore it again enriched
but do not lose patience:
that is the one thing necessary.

I shall practice it, too, in your absence
and expend my travelling words
plumed with it, and with love,
for your company, your comfort.

GRAPEFRUIT IN FEBRUARY

February was our grapefruit month
that sharp happiness
cut in half before it could be
tasted
and never all squeezed out

Sometimes they were dry
disappointment
but others quenched a thirst we never
knew we had
until we sucked the segments

February was our grapefruit month

Don't talk of it now

I'll eat my half slowly
in spoonfuls
and dig into the thick white pith.

We had an evening of beautiful singing out in the open given by one of the Literacy workers. He sang the stories of miracles and parables in Punjabi to old folk tunes accompanied by tabla and a little accordion. Many were in tears when he sang of the raising of Lazarus and Christ's words to his mother from the Cross. This is surely how the gospel was first told – and how stirring were the choruses when we all sang as in one instance 'Do not mourn, do not mourn'.

– From Sialkot

FLOODS IN PAKISTAN

The water that feeds our life
has turned against us
we saw it at a distance.

The water the buffaloes love
has risen over them;
we could see them as black tadpoles
wild in the mainstream.

This morning we chopped their food
taking more trouble than we do for our children's
but all the beasts are lost.

We herd ourselves together
on the roof of one brick house
handing up the children
shouting at the women
no time to catch hens
make bundles of grain.

We chat in the dark
to surrounding muddy tide
till pain of hunger and damp
reduce us to moans.

At daybreak the work of the potter
is fragments, turned to clay,
homes are melted, grain is spoilt,
undone our provision for winter.

We spread out grain to dry
kindle a fire
cook and eat a common meal
and chant in the stillness
until insects and vultures
reduce us to moans.

We share what we can salvage
continue efforts to live
as cattle before the flood could graze
not aware of their fate.

Water has betrayed us
five rivers have turned against us
a hand of destruction.

The Karachi Christians live in slums compared to the Punjabi ones. No water, no fields, no trees, no space. Breeze blows dust and germs. Then the other extreme of dinner-jackets and ball dresses and bearers and drinks and flying to and from Britain. The funerals are almost daily for children of the Pakistani Christians. I heard twenty-five little Pakistani children read and recite today. There was just a mud room and bare walls. The sweat dripped off them as they stood.

I visit the areas where the Punjabi Christians live after 4pm when they return from work. Even school is in shifts and sometimes the children may just be setting off, having looked after the baby while mother goes out sweeping in the morning. The women are learning to read, sew, hear Bible stories and get a few vitamins and medicines. There are about a dozen such slum areas widely scattered, which the Pakistani Padri, his helper and a Bible teacher visit regularly.

– From Karachi

I've managed to get out of going to church because the electric pump has gone wrong for the fourth time in four days, which makes life a bit impossible. There's been a strike at Murray College over Muslims eating with Christians in the hostel during Ramzan.

– From Sialkot

TWO-WAY

I think of India and yearn for my childhood,
my parents brave and hardworking who wilted
there, my siblings who died. Here I found
a country reserved as if promised and jilted.

How could I go back now? I made a craft
to sail through the world built from books
of poetry. A flimsy vessel it stays afloat
through storm and piracy, between the rocks.

That's how my ancestor sailed in a paddle steamer
from Clyde to Malay, became Harbour Master.
Practical, kind, principled, tough, yet prey
to ideals, we're set to go on like that: two-way.

Kay is sitting on the verandah looking at the birds and bougainvillea and Meg has slept under the trees.

Lots of women from the Welfare Centre are bringing me farewell presents and garlands and one said 'we'll never have such a beautiful memsahib again.'

– From Sialkot