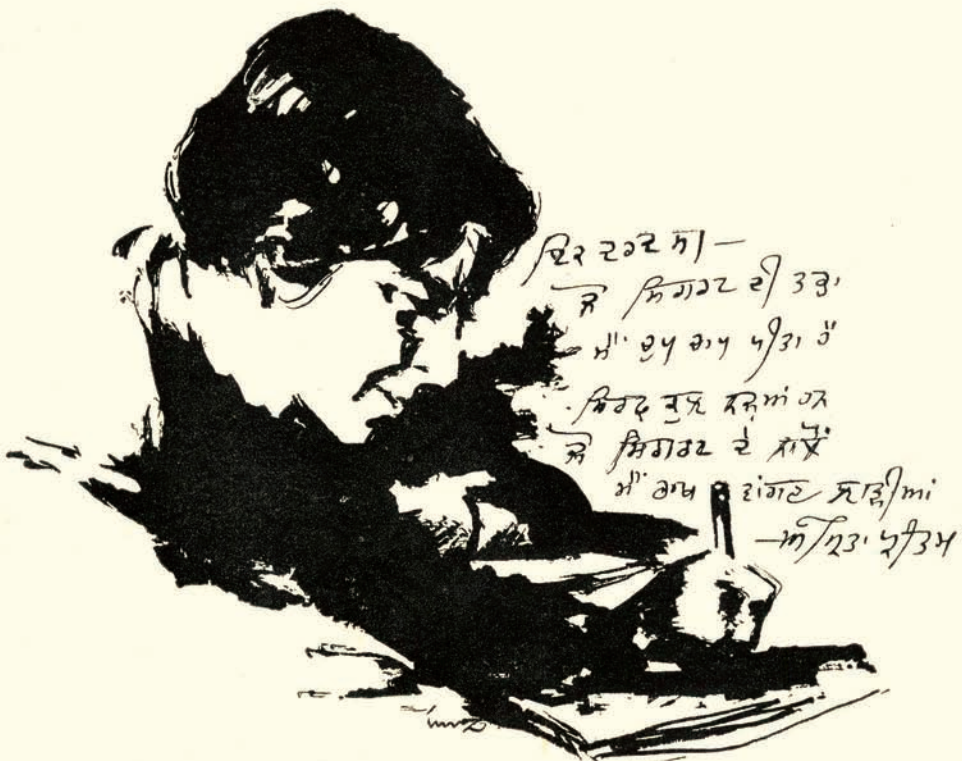


selected
poems of
AMRITA PRITAM

a dialogue calcutta publication



ਦਿਲ ਦਰਦ ਨਾ -
ਜੇ ਸਿਗਰਟ ਦੀ ਤਰ੍ਹਾਂ
ਮੈਂ ਉਧ ਰਾਹ ਯਾਤਰੀ ਹੋਂ
ਜਿਹਦੇ ਤੁਹਾ ਸਨਮਾਨ
ਜੇ ਸਿਗਰਟ ਦੇ ਸਾਥੇ
ਮੈਂ ਰਾਖ ਰਿਹਾਇ ਸਾਫ਼/ਮੈਂ
-ਮ/23 2/34

**SELECTED POEMS
OF
AMRITA PRITAM**

edited by Pritish Nandy and translated from the original Panjabi by
Khushwant Singh, Krishna Gorowara, Suresh Kohli, Charles Brasch,
Prabhakar Machwe, Mahendra Kulashrestha and Amrita Pritam



Dialogue Calcutta Publications

POEMS BY AMRITA PRITAM

TO WARIS SHAH

Speak from the depths of the grave,
to Waris Shah I say
and add a new page to your saga of love
today.

Once wept a daughter of Punjab,
your pen unleashed a million cries,
a million daughters weep today,
to you Waris Shah they turn their eyes.

Awake, decry your Punjab,
O sufferer with those suffering !
Corpses entomb the fields today,
the Chenab is flowing with blood.
Mingled with poison by some,
are the waters of five rivers,
and this torrent of pollution,
unceasingly covers our earth.
And heavy with venom were the winds,
that blew through the forests,
transmuting into a snake,
The reed of each musical branch.
With sting after sting did the serpents
suppress the voice of people.
A moment, so brief, and the limbs of Punjab turned blue
Threads snapped from their shuttles
and rent the songs at the throat,
silenced was the spinning wheel's hum,
severed from their gatherings, the women,
Branches heavy with swings,
cracked from peepul trees,
boats laden with trappings,
loosened from anchors to sink.

Despoilers of beauty and love,
each man now turned a Kedu
where can we seek for another like
Waris Shah today ?

Only you can speak from the grave,
to Waris Shah I say
add another page to your epic of love
today.

(translated by Amrita Pritam)

Dialogue Calcutta publications are edited by Pritish Nandy and published by
Rina Nandy from 5 Pearl Road, Calcutta 17, India and are printed at
mudranika 29/3, Nirmal Chunder Street, Calcutta.
Copyright © Amrita Pritam

Rs. 10 in India and \$ 4 elsewhere.

THE ANNUNCIATION

All a-tremble she awoke
Smoothed with her hand the creased coverlet
Blushed, covered her bare shoulders with her crimson veil
And glanced at the man lying beside her.
Timidly she stroked the white bedsheet
And began to tell him her dream :

“Remember the January night I slipped my foot into the stream ?
Freezing cold it was but the water warm.
What could not be came to pass.
I touched the water, it turned to milk.
It was a miracle. I bathed in milk.
Near Talwandi, is there such a stream ?
Or is it all my fancy, all a dream ?
The moon floated on the bosom of the water ;
I cupped my hands, scooped it up and drank it down.
Waters of the stream coursed in my veins
The moon quickened within my womb.

In February's bowl I mix the seven colours of the rainbow
Not a word escaping my lips
(But in my mind I muse)
This thing within me will one day be warm with life
Within me a bird hath made its nest.
What prayers should I say ?
What penances perform ?
Might a mother-to-be have vision of God within her ?

The cravings of early pregnancy
Restless palpitation of the heart
I will myself to work : to sit before the churn
And fancy that milk is churned into butter.
I dip my hand in the pitcher
And shape the butter into a part of sun-gold.
What had united us two into one ?
What destiny hath brought us together ?
Such were my dreams in the month of March.

From me to the womb within me
Yawns a dream-distance of space,
My soul falters,
My heart trembles,
April is harvest time.

What kind of wheat did I harvest ?
I put it in a sieve, separated grain from chaff
My platter was aglitter with stars.

One evening in the month of May
In the gloom of twilight
A strange sound I heard. What was it ?
A surge of melody over land and sea
Was it Maya's fancy, self's delusion ?
Was it the Lord's hymn of creation ?
An aroma of incense filled the air.
Was it the fragrance of musk rising from my navel ?
I was seized with terror
I followed the ethereal sounds into the woods
Did the music have a meaning ?
Did the dream have a meaning ?
This music and this dream.
How much of them are for me ?
How much for someone else ?
I was like a wounded doe ;
I put my ears against my belly
To catch the sound."

It was the month of June
When her eyes opened,
Softly as the flower opens its petals.
Gently as the dawning of the day,
“My life's streams are fed by bewitched water
I dreamt I saw a swan alight upon them
And when I woke I felt the flutter of its wings
Within my womb.”

I see no man near me
Nor any tree above
Wherefrom came this coconut in my lap ?
I split the shell ;
People came for the kernel
And the sweet juice of the unripe fruit.
I poured some into drinking bowls,
I performed no ritual,
Chanted no magic abracadabra,
No mantra said, no evil warded off,
Yet the multitudes flocked to my door.
Each one a sliced nut I gave and was left with more ;
What species of coconut was this ?

How bizarre a dream was this
With strings stretching into eternity ?

Rain-soaked July !
I press my bosom
Milk-like coconut juice oozes out of my breasts
What new miracles hath the month of August in store for me ?
All that passed was passing strange ;
Who will stitch the clothes
For this child within me ?
Spool in basket I spun all hours of the night
Strings that shone like rays of light.

Came the month of September
And the awakening, painful and yet joyous.
'My dear soul ! for whom spinnest thou
This yarn so lovingly ?
From the sky it's gossamer warp
From the sun its gilded woof
This thing called truth
How is it woven into a garment ?'
I made obeisance to my belly
And knew what my dreams had meant.

"The child is neither thine nor anyone else's
It is a time-less yogi
Spurred by its own mood to turn this way
For a moment tarried to warm his hands
Before the sacred fire in my womb."

October brings my faith to its fulness
Fulfils the dreams of a life-time
The burning embers within me burst into flame
My body becomes a fire-lit torch.
Ho someone ! Send for the midwife, old Mother Earth
Is come upon me, I am ready to give birth.

(translated by Krishna Gorowara and Khushwant Singh)

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

The poem looks at the paper, soon
Turns away
As if the paper's an unfamiliar man.

But just as a maiden keeps a karva fast
And dreams that night :
Some male part touches her
And in dream her body quivers.
But at times, enjoying the excitement,
Startled, she wakes,
Touches her ripe breasts,
Unbuttons her blouse,
Sees her naked self
And looking at her naked self,
Hesitates, a painful hesitation, though.
The darkness of the body spreads like a carpet
On which she reclines obversely,
Plucks its straws
And each part of her body smoulders.
The darkness of her body dawns on her
To melt in an unflinching embrace.

Suddenly a paper appears
And touches her trembling lips,
One part burns,
One part melts,
She smells a strange odour
And her hand sees the carved lines
That appear on her body.

The hand is tired,
The body is strange,
Drops of perspiration appear on the forehead,
A long line breaks
And the breath is moistened by the
Intermingling odour of birth and death.
As if all these thin black straps
Are pieces of a long cry.
Quiet and astonished ; squeezed, she sees...
Thinks of the injustice done !
Some portion of her has died
Perhaps like the abortion of a maiden !

(translated by Suresh Kohli)

OEDIPUS

On one side of the line lies my sin
On the other side of the line lies my punishment.

I thought this smell of my mother's milk
Was purity itself
But sucking her breast at once my lips were tainted.

Whatever I said
With the first murmur of my lips
Has become a lie today.

In deep night
The womb was mine alone,
Now darkness has melted.

The black snake of daylight
Has bitten my flesh,
The poison is spreading through all my limbs.

In the foreignness of my eyes
I look for my own familiar look,
A look ashamed of itself

A look afraid to dream
And afraid not to dream,
It cannot look me in the face.

Perhaps all my life
I must dip my hands in the strange flesh of bodies
Seeking the love I knew at first.

In permitted and forbidden flesh
I shall find the sweetness of that love
And the rankness of that love.

Why does this curse weigh on me ?

On one side of the line lies my sin
On the other side of the line lies my punishment.

(translated by Charles Brasch)

A VIRGIN

One married,
The other a maiden, both equally pure.
I wasn't alone but a combination of the two
When I approached your bedstead.
I was to kill, I was to finish
The maiden, the virgin for your endurance.
I did kill
It was a murder which is legal
Only the embarrassment is illegal,
And having drunk the venom of embarrassment
I saw my hands, at dawn, in blood.
I washed them,
Just as one would wash the smelling organs.
But when I confronted the mirror
I saw her standing across—
One I thought I killed last night.
Oh God, was the darkness of the bed so profound ?
Whom was I to kill, whom did I kill.

(translated by Suresh Kohli)

WORDS/MEANINGS

I encircled the meanings with an arm of words
To protect the nudity.
The words do not stop at any length.
They do not lift their eyes onto me
For they have turned, raping the meanings,
They are embarrassed.

(translated by Suresh Kohli)

MEETING THE SELF

My bed is ready for you

But take off your body
Like you did with your shirt and shoes
Keep it on the stool

It doesn't matter
Every land has its own customs

(translated by Mahendra Kulashrestha)

YOU DO NOT COME

Spring is waking and stretching its arms,
Flowers weave their silk threads
For the festival of colours.
You do not come.

Afternoons grow long
Red has touched the grapes
Sickles are kissing the wheat.
You do not come.

Clouds are gathering,
Earth opens its hands to drink
The bounty of the sky.
You do not come.

Trees murmur enchantment,
Airs from the woodland wander
With lips full of honey.
You do not come.

Seasons wear their beauty,
Night sets on its brow
A diadem of moon.
You do not come.

Again the stars tell me
That in my body's house
A candle of beauty still burns.
You do not come.

All the sun's rays vow
That light still wakes
From the death sleep of night.
You do not come.

(translated by Charles Brasch)

DEMOCRACY

abuse growing in abundance
one can eat it as much as he likes
and fill his bucket for future use

he may even chew its cud
in his spare time

(translated by Mahendra Kulashrestha)

TIME AND AGAIN

A book on the loft, I am
A bunch of scriptures, maybe ;
Or a booklet of prayers,
A chapter of the Kamasutra,
Or a prescription for venereal diseases.
I realize nothing out of these.
(Someone would have read had I been one.)

... A meeting of revolutionaries —
A resolution was passed —
I am a script of that,
The police seal upon it ...
The resolution could not be implemented,
And now lies preserved for reference.

Sparrows with straws in their beaks come,
Sit on my breast and fear the next generation
(How beautiful is the fear of generations !)
Sparrows have wings for action,
Resolutions have no wings
(Or else resolutions have no generations).

Sometimes I reckon
To smell the whereabouts of my future.

My binding loosens in fear.
In an attempt to smell something
I smell a bird's frozen shit.
Oh my earth's future
I am your present state ...

(translated by Suresh Kohli)

A HANGOVER

Like tinkling of empty bottles,
The newspaper cuttings sound.
My throat dries
Without a drink :
The body exhausted
Like a hangover
Of the previous night's drunk dreams.

(translated by Suresh Kohli)

THE SCAR OF A WOUND

When they forced my mother's womb
I came as every child must come ;
I am the mark of that blow,
Violation bade me grow ;
In my country's agony
They seared my mother's brow with me
When they forced my mother's womb.

I am the curse of man today,
Time's wound cries out in me ;
Sun and moon hid their light
And stars fell dead in thick night
When they forced my mother's womb.

I am the scar of that wound
That in my mother's body burned,
I am the shame she nursed within,
The stench and loathsomeness of man,
The sign of torment she must bear
As her body's lasting wear.

Strange fruit ripened on the tree
Of independence — look and see !
When they forced my mother's womb.

(translated by Charles Brasch)

THE MAN

I have earned a lot
And spent even more,
What remains
Is my capital :

A quarter of Hitler
A quarter of Christ
A quarter of Manu
And a quarter of Majnu

(translated by Mahendra Kulashrestha)

THE TRAVELOGUE OF THIRST

From the aqua of the Ganges to Vodka
Stretches the travelogue
Of my thirst.
A simple treatment
Of a divine birth, an undivine action.
An attempt to see a lovely face
In a glass spilling—
A need to forget a wound of the body
Which does not belong to me.
How triangular these stones are
Which like a draught of bitter medicine
I have gulped down my throat.
Many futures have I from the present saved
Perchance the present too has been from the present saved.

A thought disturbs,
Often it has disturbed,
Has suddenly pierced into the breast
Of some tune from the bow of a guitar—
One which a piano chews
Beneath its white and black teeth—
Like someone gulping a draught of death—
Terrified...
And then in no time vomit
At the feel of it.
But some breaths do live in even
The breasts that are quiet
And with the apnoea today I can say
That every travel begins from where
All travelogues end.

From the aqua of the Ganges to Vodka
Stretches the travelogue
Of my thirst.

(translated by Suresh Kohli)

A DOCUMENT

With a cover of the
Sun and the moon, the earth
Is a beautiful book.
But starvation, poverty and slavery...
God, are these your sermons
Or simply printing errors ?

(translated by Suresh Kohli)

HAND-READING

The line of faithfulness
No one knows how to read it
I know there is a line of faithfulness
On my hand
The line of faithfulness.

I don't know how to define it
How to tell
What its limits are
How far thought should be free to stray
And at what point danger lies.

How much nearness of other's lip
How much intimacy of talk
How much warmth of hands
Goes with the notion of faithfulness?
The line of faithfulness.

How can one deepen it
And strengthen it
When so many promises
Cross one's lips —
As if words could measure it!

I know there is a line of faithfulness
On my hand
It may be invisible
But I can see it
It is the long one, deep one
On my small hand

And there are five fingers
Five senses
Five gods
To witness
The line of faithfulness

(translated by Charles Brasch)

IMAGE

Stone God
All your senses are frozen
And never melt,
Your blood has been sleeping for centuries
And still does not stir.

Women burning in beauty come
To bend low
Before your dark rigid limbs,
They touch your stone feet
With silken fingers
And bow vivid heads
Intoxicated with life.

The honey smell of their breath
And the trailing smoke
Drawn up from their incense
Do not rouse you to feel.

Delicate figures without number
Moonlike beautiful faces
Narcissus eyes
Incline before your dark figure
Like snakes
That coil round the sandalwood tree.

Your lips are still thirsty
For this adoration
After centuries.
Generations of youth withered away,
Soft young arms that adored you
Faded, dried up.
Cups of life in thousands
You drank
But you are still thirsty.

I, a small part
Of that offering
I, your devotee
Will burn for a while
And burn out,
I, a small part
Of that offering.

Do you know how many
Skins of touches
Have formed on your feet
And how many lips have shrivelled up
Kissing your feet ?

Baffled, I surrender,
My virgin lips
Kiss your feet that thousands have kissed.

(translated by Charles Brasch)

UNION AND SEPARATION

The springs of tears from our eyes flow.
In this valley of white crust
This valley where nothing can grow.

All lovers are cursed
No beauty wins
All nights stand witness
For the waiting eyes, gazing at the stars.

The players of this drama change.
They stage the play retold
But the tale is the same
The tragic tale of old.

I know this, yet I wish
Your love to last till life
To get some boon by luck
Lest your words be lost.

None was ever so severed
None so met, it appears
Union and separation ... both together.
Tears embrace tears.

(translated by Prabhakar Machwe)

1, THE PUBLIC

Queens I see every day :
With bracelets on their wrists
And feet tied to anklets of law.
Myrtle for their palms
I make every day
Without a word.
I am virtuous,
Imitation is bad. I know.

The bed-fellow is the same,
The bed is different.
What should I endure :
The bed of darkness
Or the darkness of the bed ?
My womb bears a child,
Not an inheritor.
My children are obedient, virtuous
They know demanding right is evil.

My children spend
Their youth patiently
And then serve
Some jewel of the nation.

I, the public
Spend the age without a word.
Understand the eye's signal :
A good keep of a nation.

(translated by Suresh Kohli)

MARTIN LUTHER KING

Your essence is dead.
I say nothing of her shaking hands,
blue lips and swollen eyes,
I say only this :
I've seen the corpse while being bathed,
There was a poem in the womb.

(translated by Mahendra Kulashresthra)

IMROZ

A canvas
Is spread
On the easel before me
It seems
As if the patch of colour
Stuck to the canvas
Swings
Like red cloth
And the beast in the man
Raises its horn
Aims it to strike
And every street, alley and lane
Forms the ring
And Spanish passion
Rages
In my Panjabi veins—
The myth of Goya
Bull-fighting
Till death

(translated by Mahendra Kulashrestha)

PRAYER

Set in the lap of young night
A white coconut-moon
And for dates a handful of stars.
And set in the lap of young pain
For coconut the heart's wound
And for dates a few tears.
The east is preparing its cradle,
Its eternal cradle.
Night is pregnant with the sun.
Lips are preparing their cradle,
Their eternal cradle.
Pain is pregnant with song.
Sky, the ancient sage
Is taking the pulse of night,
The pulse of pain.
Midwife earth is praying
That night may never be barren
And pain never be barren.

(translated by Charles Brasch)

AN HOUR AND A HALF LONG MEETING

An hour and a half long meeting
Like a patch of cloud
Stitched to the sun
Did I my best to remove
But in vain ; nothing emerged.
Who has stitched this patch
On the sun's red, red shirt ?...

An hour and a half long meeting
Like a sentry stands at the crossroads
Today. And the inflow of thoughts, my thoughts
He stops with a mere sign of his hand.
God knows what I whispered and
God knows what He heard...

An hour and a half long meeting.
I think like an adivasi woman
That I should light up a chilam and
Smoke the tobacco of one and a half hour
In one puff, mixed with fire.
Before my senses relinquish
And turn towards a wrong route,
Before the sun bursts
While struggling to pull off the clouds,
Before the memories of a meeting
Turn into an idea of hatred...

One and a half hour's smoke
Which the air and myself in proportions may inhale,
Before its thought comes to your or my lips,
Before your or my ears refuse
To listen to it,
Before the fair sex brings humiliation to men,
Before man causes humiliation to women,
Before this, before that.

(translated by Suresh Kohli)

MEMORY

The sun was rather uneasy today
It opened the window of light,
Then it closed the cloud-window,
Then it descended the staircase of darkness.

Beads of sweat hung
On the brows of the sky ;
It undid the star-buttons
And took off the moon-shirt.

I was sitting in a corner by myself,
Your memory came to me
Like a thick and bitter smoke
From a wet log.

And with it came a hundred thoughts
As red sighs of fire
Come from a dry log,
Both logs I have quenched now.

The coals of years are scattered
Some I could quench and some not ;
When time tried to sweep them up
Its finger-tips got burnt.

The cooking pot slipped from your fingers
And broke ;
We had invited history to a feast
And it has gone away hungry.

(translated by Charles Brasch)

SOBHA SINGH

I would cast a net
In the sea of darkness
To catch a few fish
A few rays

But the entire sun
Is held in it
And with its weight
The net is drowning
My arm is drowning

(translated by Mahendra Kulashrestha)

NOT TODAY

I always do the right thing
But not today,
I always do what people ask
But not today—
No !
In Nilchander Valley
Where nothing grows old
Nothing changes
Flawless
Starless
Stormless
The blood in my hot veins is rebellious
I want to see a storm
Passionate as my blood
Giant hills
Demonic stones
I want to see the clouds
Breaking their heads
And I want to see deep gulfs
Like the gulfs of sin
I want to see the clouds
Fall into those gulfs
Their limbs shattered
I don't like pure blue sky.
I always do the right thing
But not today.

I know society has a loud voice
But my purse is full
I can buy the voice ;

I know religion will be outraged
But I shall bow my head for a while
And it will be appeased.

I know something will cry in my soul
But psychology will find me an explanation
And keep my soul quiet.

I always do the right thing
But not today.

(translated by Charles Brasch)