

POEMS BY RAJEEV BARUA

SELECTED & TRANSLATED BY KRISHNA DULAL BARUA

LINES IN THE VOID

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Poems by **Rajeev Barua**
LINES IN THE VOID

SELECTED POEMS – 1992-2009

Selected & translated by
Krishna Dulal Barua
With additional translation by
Hirendra Nath Dutta, Pradip Acharya
and **Swargajyoti Gohain**

*Dedicated to
Manna*

Lines in the void

A collection of poems by Rajeev Barua, selected & translated by
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* Translated from Assamese by **Hirendra Nath Dutta**

Translated from Assamese by **Pradip Acharya**

† Translated from Assamese by **Swargajyoti Gohain**

A note on Rajeev Barua's poetry

Rajeev Barua is a distinctive voice in contemporary Assamese poetry. His poems are refreshingly and at times deceptively simple in form but carefully crafted and rich in connotation. He uses a language that is closer to the contemporary spoken idiom but lovingly and sometimes playfully nuanced. His poems are marked by a variety of tones—sad, sombre, mocking, and playful. The playful tone of the poems like 'Pocket', 'The List' and 'Hunger in the Scales' does not lessen the effect of their serious intent. 'The List' nicely brings out Barua's concerns as a poet.

Barua uses images, metaphors and symbols creatively and judiciously. He likes to explore the metaphorical possibilities of everyday language. A fine example of this is the poem 'Hand':

*She's weaving
On the loom
A hand of her own.*

*In the depth of her heart
Stockades
A crowd of blue rocks*

.....

*In the battle the rocks shall melt
As waters break the dykes*

*She'll begin to weave
A beloved hand.*

Another beautiful example is the following from the poem 'Poet's Disrepute':

*The poet is at home today
The disrepute of not staying at home
Lazes on the bed by his side.*

Barua wants to capture ordinary experiences of mundane life and searches for beauty and solace amid them. He believes that simple

things, simple joys, spontaneity and innocence of childhood, simple acts of selflessness, kindness and honesty can make life beautiful:

*There's no age for perceiving beauty
Beautiful fruits ripen untimely as well*

(Looking Beautiful)

In some of his poems one notices a craving for a fulfilling life instead of the fragmentation that marks modern life:

*Like the water overflowing banks
Thick overgrowths of golden crops
Lie at the depths of some ponds
I pay obeisance to the owners of these ponds*

(Pond)

The experience of this fragmentation and a feeling of loss lead him, sometimes, to the frolicsome days of childhood and to the spontaneity of nature:

*I was onto my childhood game once again
Yelling out face immersed in the pond*

(Quest)

Such lines may remind one of Seamus Heaney's shorter poems.

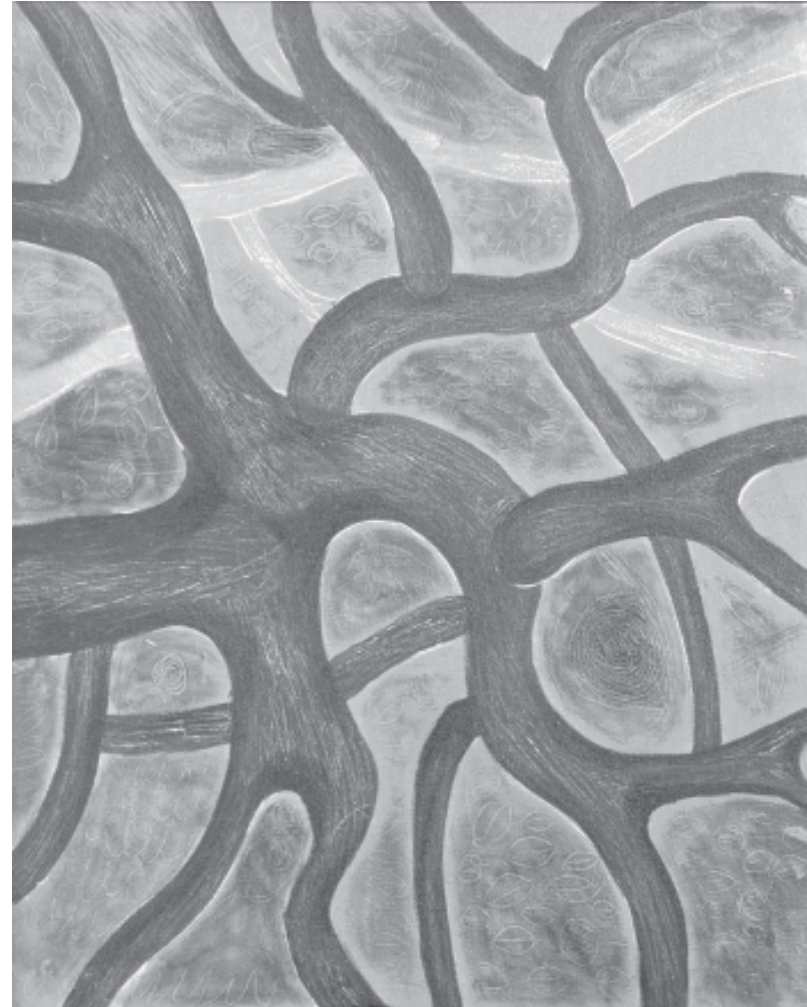
Though rooted in his culture the poet likes to broaden his horizon, for example, in a poem like 'One Sunday' which refers to Salvador Dali, Yannis Ritsos and the sun of Greece. In poetry all geographical and cultural distinctions get dissolved.

Some of Barua's poems have allusive qualities that demand serious attention to their verbal structures, for example in a poem like 'The Dead-1'. Though there is a mild note of pessimism in some poems ('The Mart', for example) Barua is basically an optimist who likes to experience and understand life in its totality.

As one who has read Rajeev Barua's poems in Assamese I can say with confidence that all the translators of his poems have taken extreme care to capture the rhythm, tone, texture and connotations of the original poems. They have succeeded in taking a reader who is not familiar with the original to Barua's poetic world.

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Ballad of dejection

A ripened fallen leaf
Doesn't need to be shown its way
A ripened leaf knows
Where to head for

Tomorrow is always a new day
Nothing ever remains the same
It mingles with them
That have already lost
An entity of their own

When misfortune befalls
Even ripe fruits bring dejection
Even the lace of the sun
Entering through the window
Dances on the floor raising its fangs

Roll your leavened bread
As round as you can
The sun shall toast it in its hearth
Only take care not to spend
The remaining coins of rectitude



The hand

She's weaving
On the loom
A hand of her own

In the depth of her heart
Stockades
A crowd of blue rocks

A troop of ants
Camps at the gateway

Moments later
Round-the-clock
A war shall begin

In the battle the rocks shall melt
As waters break the dykes
The ants shall turn boisterous

She'll begin to weave
A beloved hand



You and I in the office room

When all alone
In the empty office-room
After office hours
I move over to the empty chairs
And sit
On the opposite side of my office- table

A short while ago visitors had been there sitting in rows
And I watch myself
Intently with their eyes

My seat is a soft-cushioned cosy chair
With ample span for watching around
Now conversely I observe myself with their eyes
My manner of speaking, my tantrums and their overgrowths
I echo back the questions they put to me
Or questions they thought they would ask
I activate their ears to hear my answer
I go on wishing their desires
Observe my irritations caused by their
Continual repetition of the same questions,
Now I try to find out through their eyes
If the irregularities kept hidden in my files
Are accessible to them

I measure the fatigue caused by
The ten visits just for getting a single work done
I try to ease their fatigue and
Refuse the undue requests,

If I can rightly enter into their thoughts
And wield their expectations
Exhale their sighs
Truth will find no hiding place
Nor get truncated,
I notice where the irreducible truth
In its totality lies
The two opposite ends of my glass-topped table in unison

When the joyless evening files into my room
Along with the oncoming darkness
I clearly discern around a face tinged with sorrow
Whose face is it,
Mine or that of someone who came to visit me?



The Pond

A fragment of the sky fell
And became a pond in my garden
I raised its banks
Planted trees to serve as sentries

At last I'd a pond of my own
I remain engrossed upon its bank
Watching sunrise and sundown
Sometimes I fling pebbles on its stagnant water
In search of ripples
I beckon the winds that recline on the plantain leaves

The enchanting waters of my pond
Swell in the rain, dry up in the sun's heat
Wading across the water I pick up
The grace of aquatic crops

Sometimes the pond grows filthy
As a glass of tea without a lid
Brought from a stall across the street

Like the water of overflowing banks
Thick overgrowths of golden crops
Lie at the depths of some ponds
I pay obeisance to the owners of these ponds

What a poet you are
Without a pond of your own !



Looking Beautiful

There's no age for perceiving beauty
Beautiful fruits ripen untimely as well

If the new bride's veil falls
While sweeping the courtyard in the morn
It looks beautiful

Even if you miss your slumber
Staying awake all night long
Beside a neighborhood patient
You look beautiful

Having way fared a long distance
If a tired river suddenly
Bends its course --- it looks beautiful

The demure smile of a teenaged girl
Stopping midway while crossing the busy street
Looks beautiful

Sucking its mother's teats
The child falling into deep sleep
Looks beautiful

If you return the hundred-rupee note
Received in excess by mistake from the shopkeeper
You look beautiful

If you redirect a misplaced letter
To the right address
You look beautiful

There's no age for perceiving beauty
In the Amaravati of love
You may even get to like someone's mannerisms
And for the sake of beauty
You may fall in love again



Ballad of the empty bottle - 1

I fill the empty bottles every morning
With drinking water
The filling cannot be done in the evening
They remain filled upto their necks
With memories

The traits of a bottle grow apparent
Only when it's empty
Then begin its infancy youth
Debris or servitude

Have a look at the kerosine-bottle
Black stains all over it
Its worldly senses ripen untimely
As in orphans

Some identities come to the fore
Only when empty
As the light of a star dead years before
Reach us just today

Let one be filled on his own
Some empty spaces are always empty
Come let's go there today
If we're bored in the evening
We'll watch the dances of empty bottles.



Tale of a pair of shoes

*"A pair of shoes had fallen in love
With a pair of feet" - Sapardi Djoko Damono*

A pair of old shoes lies upon the granary platform

A spider resides in the right shoe
A mason-wasp in the left
A web on the threshold of the right shoe - half spun
Earthen capsules on the left

LOVER OF THE SHOES

Turning lifeless both the shoes
Keep reminiscing the past
The right muses about a road
Smooth as the cheeks of a woman just back from the parlour
The left thinks of the muddy village paths
With puddles of slushy water
Both the shoes had fallen in love with a pair of brawny feet

LINES IN THE VOID/20

NEIGHBORS OF THE SHOES

The shoes' neighbors are as old as the shoes' age
Countless empty bottles small and large
A pair of torn tyres and tubes
A broken sieve, a cluster of torch cells
A tuft of rusty wires, banana peels
A torn fish-net, a broken arm of a chair
A fish-scoop and a lute with broken strings
Are the shoes' neighbours

FOES OF THE SHOES

There are two foes of the shoes
They appear as soon as it's dark
Wagging their tails they smell and nibble the bodies of the shoes
The tiny tongues lick the inners and outers
They return in the morn
To the fragrance of ripened paddy

FUTURE OF THE SHOES

The left shoe raises its ears
A shriek would rush in rending the noon
The shriek would try to lift it
Then carry it off rending the wind.....
The right shoe even now expects
That its second lover would be born
With this hope it clears cobwebs even today



LINES IN THE VOID/21

The Door

Black clouds envelop the sky
Now and then a deafening thunder-clap
Unbroken clamours of birds and mites
Dead leaves and sand whirl in the wind

Conches----bells ring
The temple door opens
The door of religion remains shut

After a bath in the old pond
A group of devotees keep pounding their heads
On the temple stones
Blood oozes out of the wounds
Of their tonsured heads
The temple priest fills huge vessels with the blood
Taking care not to have a spilt drop on the floor

A light drizzle outside
Beneath an old peepul
Another group of devotees
Get tonsured
The door of religion hasn't opened yet
Till this door opens
The devotees shall keep pounding their heads
The single-robed priest
Shall keep filling the vessels with blood



Poet's Disrepute

The poet is at home today
The disrepute of not staying at home
Lazes on the bed by his side

Though the poet appears not to celebrate
His daily life without poetry
While passing each moment of his life
Uttering each word
Singing each song
Everyday he remains not as anyone

You know about Arthur Rimbaud who at nineteen
Left poetry to be a cart-driver

Is he a poet only while he pens
Or else when would Octavio Paz
Tie his son's shoe-laces
When would Milton change his baby's napkin
On which night would Coleridge write Midnight Frost
Beside his sleeping son
Where would Jibanananda be seen returning home
With a loaded bag from the market
When would Navakanta fry potato chips
When would Nilmani set up
A garden of roses and thorns

Some aspire to be poets just to be human
Nourishing life, they want to store memories
Clearing cobwebs, they fry boiled lentils
They find out their daughter's lost socks
Stitch split buttons

Though the poet stays at home
The disrepute of not staying at home
Shall remain with him for ever



The Stool

I clearly hear my wife
Looking for me
Her needs are high above
At a height she can't reach
She needs my height

She hasn't been able to find me
Now and then I get lost in this way
She scours for me
On our first wedding night
I got lost
In the glow of her dowry

Today too I'm pretending to be asleep
I can hear her voice cold as a serpent
Finding no response she dragged out a stool
Lying under the bed
(I hadn't seen the stool before)
Mounted upon the stool
She got hold of her needs
With her nimble hands one after another

The wheel of worldly life rolled again
This time its sound really
Lulled me to sleep
In my slumber
I grew envious of the wooden stool...

P.S. My daughter is thirteen
I pray she grows tall enough
Not to need a stool



Pocket

1.
What a thrill we had when dad returned from market
How the odour of new clothes leapt on the infantile body
Over the roof-top flew a swarm of boisterous laughter
Through the chinks of our boisterousness my sister sobbed intermittently
Her new frock was always without a pocket
Through my father's ears entered and quietly emerged
A childlike curiosity:
In the red-blue-green-violet frocks of girls
Why weren't there any pockets
None but the tailor knew better about it
(Maybe he too wasn't aware)

2.
A tender pocket he is
He carries along stains of mangoes berries plums
Coin from rituals and stolen coins from
Underneath father's bed
Fried grams pulses peanuts at the cross-road stall
The saliva of girls become their tongues' taste
Marbles won by straightened fingers

Damp earth chilly wind
Pocket full of ripe jujubes

Pockets are for collection
For the greedy tongues
To compete with mates
Pockets are for chasing away fistfuls of cold

3.
Pockets too have their adolescence
The shape and the mind's periphery develop with age
The perfumed hanky peeps out
Love-letters keep the inner air warm
The back-pocket carries all along a coloured comb

4.
How mysterious is the pocket
Even damp air fills its tummy
Sighs empty it
A pocket can be filled only when it's known how it's emptied
The chest-pocket too has its morals
Pickpocketeers are unable to slit it

The worth of fillings ascertains a pocket's years of life
A filthy pocket rots as a leper's body
A pocket with a hole is as good as being pocketless
A pocket doesn't ensure that you've things to fill it
Some pockets remain empty despite being filled

Even without pockets girls can glean as boys
It's only for him who can glean that pockets matter...



Firewood

With the blank sheet of paper before me
Today too I looked outside
Through the window that I often opened for view:
With the axe upon his shoulders
My father was trudging ahead through the mist

The wintry mist engulfed a lone peepul stump
Left while clearing the woods

The axe stripped the tree-stump off its wraps
Of the attire of mystery draped by the mist
From the heat of the hot sand in the pan
Wooden fragments scattered all over the place
As parched paddy thrown about

My mother guarding the black monster-like kettle
Hung from a long iron bar shouted:
Son, pick up the wooden fragments and bring them home
This is your age for picking

Even today while waiting to pick up wooden fragments
Suddenly the window shuts itself
Perhaps the age for picking is no more
I wield the pen in hand as an axe
With care so that the chops fall not
On the fresh growth of trees and creepers



Dead - 1

Today he has fallen dead
An unnatural prematured death

Those who had seen him in daylight
Grieved:
He was an ascetic
Before sunrise he came to the bank of the Ganges
And took his bath every morn

Those who had seen him at night:
He was a militant
Rising at pre-dawn
He came to the banks of the Ganges and washed
The wounds of the night the bloodstains
He buried his pistol and carbine in the river-sand

None saw him either during the day or night
(Perhaps he himself didn't)

Poring over the news of his death
Those who had never seen him said:
He was the dusk



Game of pot-breaking

For no games had potters moulded the earthen-pots

Lest it should break
It was tenderly lowered from the wheel
And laid under the sun
The heat of fire poured colour on the potter's wish
The heat of the sun gave it the tawny hue

When the thrill of breaking yields value
How can the fragile pot remain unbroken
For the wont of smashing and remoulding
Dream-coins land on the potter's hands

Feigning blindness without a blindfold
I've seen many a mind shattered to pieces
Families teeming with joy
Yet we play the game of pot-breaking
Blindfolded

The thrill of breaking earthen-pots
Is akin to cracking prickly heats
Born from the weight of the grief of breaking
Dreams of moulding anew
Thousands are born from fullness
Fullness is born from emptiness



The Mart

It's Sunday, market day
a day measured out
after the scales are set

Whatever you have not is mine
what I do not is yours

Come, let's sit at the market
And fly each other like kites

Come, let's unburden the sighs in our bosom
shed the extra weight off our body
and make room for the fresh

Out topping this market there's another
a cyber mart
that grows into a village
in land, air and water
the unseen roots of that village
(we'll go there too, if we can)

Come, let' sit facing each other
you sell your haves
I batter my 'nonnes'
let's measure out our market worth
in this busy, crowded market
you on this side, me on the other
a rainbow in between

When our pockets are empty
we become one
Come, let's get drenched in the rain
and forget who sold whom

We've nothing left to sell now
nothing even to buy
It's empty
Emptiness is weightless like the soul
Come, let's go back empty-handed
and in the west, see a fulfilled sundown
after each sundown, history too is soiled.



Hunger in the Scales

Last time with the sack of rice I bought
Came a pair of rats
Next day I approached the grocer to ask
What's the matter - some change in the system
As one free when buying two
As free toy-pistol with baby-food

Thus has the bamboo-flowering nation's plight
Been yoked with resources
With the new quotation of want and supply
If the problems were to be shared in this way
Perhaps it wouldn't take too long for equality to arrive

Strange are the ways of this country
Crops are distributed before production
Just as the rats burrow the fields
Before the paddy bears spadix
When consumers increase
Rice have to be bought in terms of sacks
Amazing indeed it's to see
The rats' knowledge of geography

Aspiring to be a model eating nothing
Though you grow emaciated
For the catwalk on the ramp
You must atleast be able to stand

None has emerged a victor
Playing around with hunger...



Breaking away

You would rather be complete in your own rut
Self assured in your orbit,
You traipse along where dreams bud

Whenever you want to break out
dewdrops make your path slippery
dark, dense shrubs by the road stand in your way
soon as darkness gathers
they claim your bounty for theirs
even when you say it's the river you'd see
Ratnakar would not spare you

Freeing the inhibited tongue you move on
yours wishes are pomegranate flowers
yours wishes that spell your lifeline

Soon as you break out of ranks
you lie scattered like egg shells
or hang on trees and shrubs
the discard of a sloughing snake

It's better if it starts here
in this rain-swept valley



Morning Stroll at Bhomoraguri

The sun was caught in the fisherman's net
As soon as it was born
It was held captive in a net
Woven with golden yarn
As a vigorous fish tossing and turning about
The scene was restless

The fleet steps craving to see
The long bridge stopped
A short while ago the boat that kept still
With the heron by the water-line
Was playing now with the sun

The sun settled at one end of the boat
Dipped into the water
The boat too pursued
And jumped onto the sun's back

The boatman paddles his boat to the bank
Beholding his face on the fish scales
Is it the sun on the boat's laps or
Is it the boat upon the sun's back –
The pedestrian stumbles on the dry land and light!



The Sweeper

Don't disturb the woman in the house
Busy with the broom
You won't find any response
With a handful of magic-sticks she drives Satan away

None of you should pester her
She is at war with the foes of the house
Let her sing alone for all
The unsullied songs of life

She breaks the dark rooms of the house
And builds them anew as she wishes
Climbing the tall walls she cleans the soots of fate
Even the gods get no indulgence

Don't ask the woman with the broom anything
She has no answer
Stay wherever you are
As a patient's kin
Waiting outside the OT

The woman with the broom stays in seclusion
Raising dykes of solitude
She hears nothing amid repeated calling - the air is deaf-mute

None knows where she disappears
Climbing over the last wall of the day
When she returns next morn
Our house is already swept clean
Despite seeing the spick-and-span
She begins to use the broom again

Don't stand in the way of the sweeper
Satan shall be resurrected again.



Words

I borrow whatever you say in the morn
To utter in the evening
Sometimes you remain silent
I then grow despondent scouring for words

Your silence is futile
Talking is your trait
It's only when you keep on talking
That the goddess of speech stays alive
The virgin store-house of solitude is filled

You never speak in the evening
Perhaps you keep sharpening your tongue
To talk about new things next morn

My words are not your echoes
There's nothing original about them
"The purport of words are slowly on the wane"
None has been able to have their final say too
Whatever had happened continues to occur ceaselessly
Whatever is to happen
Shall never happen ever

Between morning and evening the duration is long enough
The young girl's mind alters time and again
The weather's mood changes
The aged face interpolates into the boy's
Hence no one says that I borrow your words



Goa - 2000

How fortunate the people are
To behold the river merging with the sea each day

Splitting the tummies of Kingfish upon the sea-shore
Fishermen find strains of bejewelled music

The sun pendent on fringed palm-leaves
In frolic with sea-waves
Lengthens the afternoon

Twin gusts of saline breeze
One blows pulling the hair
The other as blood in circulation internally

The waves gushing forth for the smell of fish
On the back of Kulwa beach
Get pricked by the thorns of snails and fish
And retreat again touching people's feet

Yet there's no sunset
The sun dangles on a fisherman's net
He guards the rough salt-smear'd creels

In the evening a lamp adrift on the Mandavi
For the people by the shore is it
A celestial light or a flowing deception.



Ballad of the empty bottle - 2

The empty bottle wasn't aware
That the one sitting in front of him
Was the cause of its plight
For before it was empty it'd seen
The inner and outer beings
of the man
Anguish in emptiness

In the empty space
A bird built its nest
Layed eggs and hatched
Two little ones were born ...
The man wasn't awake even then
The nestlings grew up stirring their feathers
And one day took wing
Only the flapping of wings brought the man to his senses
Seeing the empty bottle tumble
In the wind raised by the birds' wings
He pounced upon it...

Now only could the empty bottle realize
Who was behind its emptiness.



Network

Dabbing the sky with lustre
The red bus departed
Now it's a gloomy evening
A girl returns from the bus-station
Her face bearing marks scorched by age
'This is what fate has for me always'-
Perhaps the words were meant for the path
Perhaps a passer-by or two on their way back home
Heard her

Paving a path for herself she moved on

A cyclist was behind her
Cell-phone glued to his ears
Shouting in the air about a missed call
He rushed along the girl's path
(I saw clearly his empty carrier)
Along the same path sped a luxury car
A sleek lap-top on the owner's laps
Poring over mails on the Net
From some lover abroad
Mobile e-love...

P.S. With utmost ease these things go on.
I haven't piled up images here lest a deeper meaning should emerge.
An outer meaning could complicate matters.



One Sunday

One Sunday morn all of a sudden
Salvador Dali walked into my kitchen
He removed his tongue and put it aside
The moment he arrived
He sent out the cook to look for lice
And began to toast the half-rolled
Pastes of unleavened bread
We don't know what we ate that day
Our tummies were full till dusk

We went out in the evening
For a stroll by the sea-shore
We saw the river emerging from Yannis Ritsos's little finger
Merge with the sea

For the cup of red tea in the morning
The driver-less car with wheels of sliced lemon
Was waiting by the shore
From the car tourists see
The sun of Greece, sea-rocks and olive trees
We too shall hop into the car today
Would poetry permit us ...



Tathagata

(Beside the Bodhibriksha)

Having traversed this distance can one return
On returning can I recover this life, Tathagata
When weary people are sunk in slumber
After a grand assemblage

All inert limbs and organs
Lie scattered around

I rise from them and stealthily
Drag myself to you, Tathagata

I miss you in the rocks and worship the trees
I crawl as the ants over their cool shade
Here none treads upon others' shadows even
I look for you to repay my debt
For the shade of trees
Tathagata you've gone much afar
: Can one return after being so afar
On returning shall I recover life, Tathagata

: No one traverses this distance to return
The journey is from nothingness to nothingness
Life is after all a worship of nothingness---
Sacred nothingness.



* *Bodhibriksha - Tree of Enlightenment*

The Goalkeeper

Things are somewhat hazy
Upto the roots of tree there's light
Yet dark droplets
Keep dripping from leaves -
Someone remarked
From the distance he too had a look
Fireflies
That's actually the roving Akbar Miyan
In the pitch-darkness puffing at a bidi

What needs to be done
Score goals or save them
The ball keeps floating in the air
The score is nil
An uproar of applause
In the empty stands
Sweaty legs with swollen veins
An invisible referee
At the viewers' peak of frenzy
A comic relief is much in need

Would there be a goal
Can such goals be saved by us as keepers
Should we score goals or save them
Whom do we ask
Albair Camus*?
He too had saved after all
A lot of goals for Algeria



** Camus was a goalkeeper for the Algerian football team*

The Optical Afternoon

She looked into my eyes
She'll let me see more than I see now
She hasn't asked how much I yearn to see

I'll see only as much as she shows
There isn't a better place to learn
About one's limitations
There isn't a better place to learn
About one's horizons
After all it's the same life, the same sums,
The same calculations, the same alphabet

I know with another eye
I see clearer than at present
I'd come to test her eyes
If they could spot that other eye...



Slumber

As I was about to change the old calendar
A mild knock sounded on my door
First streamed in a gust of restless breeze
Behind it was a virgin
All set to welcome waited
My chair with broken arm-rests, the pale cup and saucer
And magazines from our land and abroad

As the girl sat sipping at her tea I took a round
With the pace of sound touching a market,
A wedding hall, a nursing home, a birthday party
After her tea the girl rendered from her heart's core
A song of self-adoration
Then she slumped into slumber
As she fell into deep sleep I removed her sandals
Sketched on her cheeks a constellation of flowers
Fixed around her a mosquito-net
Woven with pink yarn

Without waking her up I set up my home
In her sleep she conceived
While dreaming she became a mother
Counting the ages of trees from the courtyard
She became a grandmother
One day suddenly waking up from her slumber
She stared at my eyes and said :
Hadn't there been any sugar in my cup of tea ?



Actor

Just now
I was introduced to some one
I raised folded palms
In polite greeting.

When I sought his leave
I told him
Return my greeting
With it I have to receive greet
Several other guests.



You're First Your Own

There's joy in acceptance
Fire or water
In rejection there's pain
Water or fire
Invocation or renunciation
It's solely your own:

A short while ago
When your trouser-belt
Endowing you with courage
As the fastener of trust
Startled you as a serpent
Lying on the floor
(the dirty trousers all in sweat
entered the washing-machine)
A lasting question-mark was left behind
In your acceptance and rejection.....

You yourself should approve of
Each question on sight and sound
Can each approval be shorn of error
Haven't you given
A single approval of emptiness

How would you rear up eternity
You can pass a rainy day
Reading Garcia Marquez
Yet such a day can roll by
Even if you find an old patch of ringworm

Look at the palm of your hand once
A strong fate-line and a life-line
Now fold your fingers into a fist
On the other side you'll see four mountain-peaks
Which would you choose to climb
The circle of fate or a mountain-peak
Acceptance or rejection
Fire or water
Invocation or renunciation
The choice is yours-
For you're first your own.



Quest

Just after retirement
I'd a house made of concrete

A new house that we could call our own

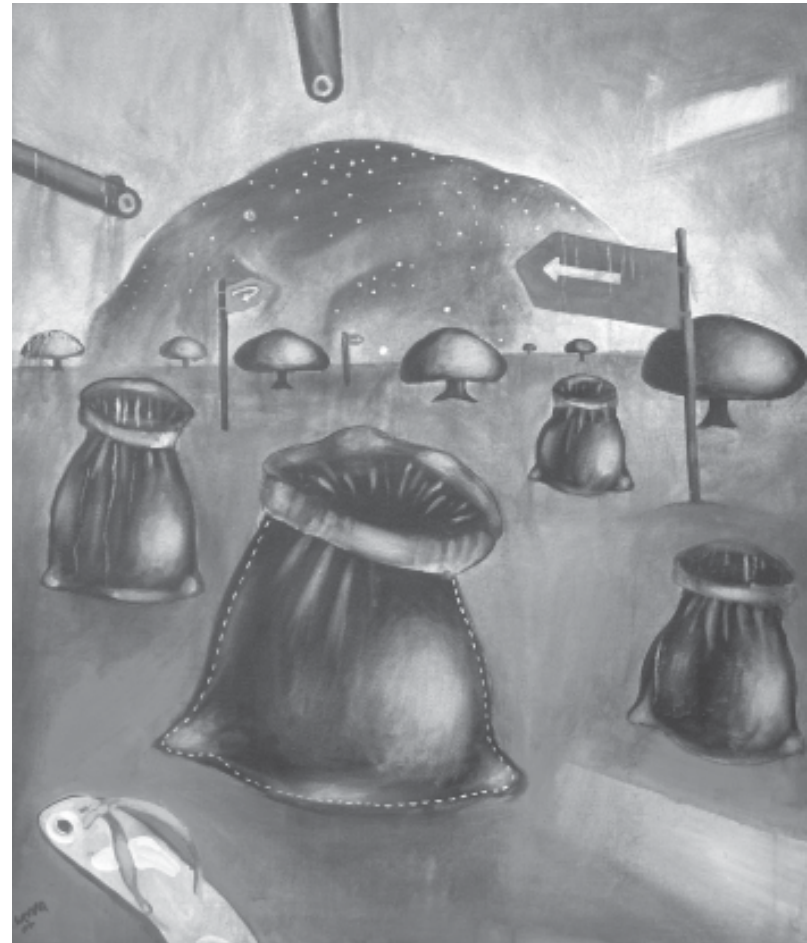
As I stepped in
I found the house
Occupied by echoes
I was silently happy
Anytime they would emerge at my call

I was onto my childhood game once again
Yelling out face immersed in the pond

We entered the house on an auspicious day
My wife filled its emptiness with old furniture
New daughter-in-law filled the remaining nooks and corners

One day as I opened the antique chest
I recalled the echoes
I grew eager to have a look at them
I called them aloud a number of times.....
No, I wasn't to get an answer

Now with old age my heart seems to weigh me down
Maybe deep within
The echoes have petrified.



Utkal

How embellished the rivers are
Conches sound on the shore
Songs of harvest

Hurry up hurry up
The sea of life isn't afar
When nearing home
Whose feet aren't in flight

Before mingling with the sea
The river delivered the sun of Utkal
On the palm leaves
Splashes of hot blood
The Odissi is born in the river-bends
The unevenness of Sarala's poems
In the billowing restlessness of the sea
The pointed caps of the Nuliyas are as the waves

Leaving the sea of life
The pennant of the Jagannath temple in the evening
Has the fasting boy who'd gone to change
Returned
Let Kelucharan put on anklets
Once his feet slip it'd be unfractured emptiness
As a single utterance can sometimes
Prop up a life

Still now there are blood stains on the Doya banks
Black crows in Cuttack's sky
As ink-marks on the boyhood shirt
Sprinkled by a naughty mate
Let the Buddha sit once again to meditate
The stone cutter's slumber break in the Chandrabhaga's flow
Dreams be sculpted on rocks
Sunlight sweep away the leprosy of wood
Waves are the frolics of water
For waves seas are seas
For grief life is life



Shadow

A group of men
Sit on the bank of the pond
Staring at their images in the water

The fish swim up
To swallow the light in their eyes
Thwarted they turn back
Shaking their fins.

When the wind brushes against the water
The men play hide and seek
With their shadows.

They watch the shadows
And then go home
They exchange not a single word
The truth is, they see nothing
Apart from the shadows.

The next day wearing the same clothes
They appear again
And stare at the shadows
With unblinking gaze.

One day the water will dry up
The men will raise a clamour
On soaring sight of the shadows

The fish in search of water
Will creep up their eyes.



Chinked Scripture

You regret
A chink has remained
In your new house

I said: You're a poet, a visionary
Through the window slits
It's only a maiden's face
That's most appealing...

Hidden in the earthen crack
Sita is an epitome of chastity
Through the chinks of broken glass
Even the songs of the dry wind can be heard
In the flute-holes flow songs of the earth
Beauty's charm pierces the nose, ears, navel
The keys too after all seek to bore the lock

The showers of the night
Scour for the earthen cracks in the darkness
Seeds drop... germinate
The forefinger scours for the mystery-hole
The stitching thread scours for the needle-hole
Creation... creation... creation



The Generation

It's an old habit of mine flipping over the pages
Of journals in book-stalls. Especially in the afternoons.
A little bump or two with customers are rare.
Never annoying.

The other day I came across my favourite writer on a new
journal. I mean his photograph bearing a smile. Just
beneath it a new write-up of his - unfamiliar as if it'd
just been completed
A warm fragrance emanated
Clouds of smoke too soared humming

I immediately closed the journal
The curious book-seller stared at me
A mild exchange resulted in a moment

Returning home I sat down reverently
And pored over the pages at random
At last as I was about to go through the write-up
of my favourite writer

My eye-glasses moistened
As I wiped the glasses with a soft piece of cloth
My eyes caught sight of my long nails
As I began to trim my nails with the open journal before me
My mind raced back towards our farm-hand working
at our backyard

With a fried little fish at one corner of his dish
He effortlessly swallowed two full dishes of rice
Chewing the fish at the end
With what gratification he gave out his belches...

P.S. Just for the few moments that glow alight
We rummage our entire lives



Yatayu*

The news of appearance
Of the sun and rain
Of darkness and light
Is known to all

I'm waiting to convey him the news
He isn't aware of
The news he really is in need of

Dislodging my body's bulk of flesh
I degrade myself to a mite
The hollow body would be
A sojourn for fish
Once dumped into the water

I'm a seed with a dried rind
A seed, not blighted corn
My body lies as a snake's slough

A sense of a little erect entity
A little whiff of pure air to breathe
A few inches of my native land to stand on
A stretch of sky to gaze upon
What more do I wish for

As a witness of an age
I'm waiting to convey a piece of news
That's ancient
That never grows time-worn
When I get fed up waiting for long
I visit my old love

If a beloved too can turn old
Where does a body stand



**Yatayu: A bird in the epic 'The Ramayana' who sacrificed its life while trying to save Sita from Ravana.*

The list

The numbers are invisible to me
As are the dates
The end of the month
So for a visible act
She comes out of the mosquito-net
To stack a slip
With the unavoidable list of the month
As she finishes
Her kitchen-cans swing and sway to a dance

Her list and restlessness
Both land in my hands
She's aware of my dread for lists
Of my annoyance even for unseen letters therein
And she too has a needless urge
To stray beyond the fringes of a list going through the list pensively
I weigh it on my scale

Today in her list I came across
A queer item-- Poetry seeds
What's this strange object - a product launched anew !
She said : It's been quite some time
Since you'd penned your last poem
Would you find poetry seeds in the market
(She happens to be the first reader of each poem of mine)

I again brought my mind to the list
Everything grew corporeal before my eyes
I saw the life-cycle of crops, labour - sweat - struggle
Distribution of goods, markets, profit or slump

Amid all these
I find myself as a glowworm in broad daylight
These all can be poetry seeds

As if a poetry seed were some item of luxury
I promptly struck off her new want from the list ...



Plight of Pluto

A game centring round a football
Was cancelled
Tickets of this game are in the hands of every spectator
Players' legs revolve round the ball
The legs drill along the orbit

It's only the topic that's football
Not worldliness

If from the nine buttons of the blue jersey
One is lost
Nothing matters
And...
The football, after all, doesn't go seeking
the goalpost by itself.

It has to be played
The thrill of victory
Or the disrepute from loss
Rests always with the players

It's victory for the football all the time



A Couple of Poems

1.
A thousand bricks covered
A plot of green grass
Stones buried the holes
Sands stretched out their wide arms
Iron was imprisoned
Cement perspired profusely even in the damp weather
From the blue-print emerged the roof
The rains that poured that very day asked

What is the roof for
When the sky is already there
I said : For you
Just for you...

2.
The swarthy body of the night
Is chilly as the serpent
Stretching strides with eyes shut
Over this portion of the path
Is passed childhood anguish

The tethered afternoon
If cut and cleansed early
Would do for the night's meal
Krishna shall come as a guest at dusk
With darkness a baby on his laps

'Darkness, fall asleep
Now it's dead of the night



Home

A home came upon two bullock-carts
Leaving behind a grassless courtyard
An old basil and a row of freshly thatched huts
In the deluge of darkness sprouting in the palm of the hand
In the flickering flame of the lamp hung in the bullockcart
A melodious inebriation ---- a rhythmic journey in inauspiciousness

A home raised in an empty room here by reminiscence
A roof through which a falling star cannot pass
Four walls through which fireflies and snails cannot enter
Four pillars weighty as the legs of an elephant
A sleek floor wiped by sun-light

All journeys begin from home itself
From here alone can we recognize all routes--- right and wrong
Filling the void how many a home is built and broken by time
No man has been born in a home built by himself
First he learns to draw rectangles
It's only later on that he scours for an empty space and builds a home

Some people don't know how to draw rectangles
They can't find empty spaces too--- they move about aimlessly
For dearth of light many leave their fancied homes half complete
Actually homes are people---- people themselves are the warmth of homes

For me homes exist even now in story-books
A preserved peepul leaf



Remnants of ambrosia

The remnant of everything remains
Wherever completion ends, from thereon nothingness comes to view
Accounts of history remain on the heart of rocks
Even in pitch-black darkness lie particles of light
In the depths of a drying well
Rests the thirst of water
An aged's face is cast on a youth's
The remnant of the first kiss landed on the lover's cheeks
Remains on the tone of withered lips
The remnant of the nodule on your cheek
Rests on your grand-daughter
For which lover-eyes find her beautiful
Even when the fire gets extinguished the heat remains
Amid truths uttered remain tinges of falsehood
In lies remain the urge to utter truths
Aswathama (the elephant) is dead
Amid today shall remain yesterday's
In tomorrow shall rest today's
Remnants of ambrosia



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POEMS BY RAJEEV BARUA
SELECTED & TRANSLATED BY KRISHNA DULAL BARUA

LINES IN THE VOID



RAJEEV BARUA (B. 1963): ASSAMESE POET AND BROADCASTER; HAS PUBLISHED FIVE COLLECTIONS OF POEMS; RECIPIENT OF THE MUNIN BARKATAKI AWARD FOR POETRY (1998). HE SERVED AS A JOURNALIST FOR EIGHT YEARS IN AN ASSAMESE DAILY. IN 1993, SELECTED BY U.P.S.C, HE JOINED ALL INDIA RADIO AS A PROGRAMME EXECUTIVE; PRESENTLY WORKING IN ALL INDIA RADIO, GUWAHATI.



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