

Hoshang Merchant

## Beauty Canto: XXIV

I wanted to write a poem on beauty  
but I'm so tired I went to sleep  
3 hrs. into sleep I dreamt a devastating fire  
A sister-figure survived:  
Has my dying sister in Chimayo, NM finally died?  
I felt peaceful: Like the landscape after fire  
Last night it rained:  
I wake up. I read. I write. It's 3 am  
Once the classical poets appeared great  
Now even contemporaries appear greater  
• than me

This cannot be  
Or is it the beginning of a new humility  
before death  
'The only thing that knows how it'll end  
When it begins, is a sentence....  
I was never proud Just angry:  
with a rage for beauty  
Now I'm not beautiful, I'm fat...  
Don't you understand that my little microcosmic me  
Is only all of the universe  
inside my head / belly / butt / balls  
And my hand caresses all that  
As it invites your hand to caress that in you  
• or me

How are we different?  
At 60, I hold back  
Do not molest the boy bringing me home from a party  
He's 20. He's polite. He says he can pretend  
He's from Arizona. Was I like him when I came back?  
All of India's become like that, very hip and with it  
Thank God I slipped back into my Indian ways

Is that when things begin to appear like other things

Today's summer here was a Bombay summer then  
I was trembling with rage, near to tears  
begging the univ. from 9-5 i.e. 8 hrs + 18 yrs.  
to make me a professor: Filling applications in quintuplet  
Prove you were born etc.

I was still my father's child  
Abandoned wanting approval  
How can poets look for metaphors  
When all of life is a morality play?  
At the Farewell Party the Jewish boy  
Who's walked barefoot through Africa  
Asked a fat classmate to jump on his belly  
— As she did this I saw the rise in his crotch  
And his head thrown backwards from the stage  
Hanging off the proscenium he recited 'Macavity' – all of it  
Is this a metaphor for the poet  
All of it happening right before my eyes  
Who then was it who died  
As I turned into sleep  
Why is all this not included in our poetries?  
Everything seems to happen in a haze:  
Insomnia?  
—Don't tell me it's the poet's condition  
Today I saw the whole campus somnambulate  
even unto my joking clerks + typists  
As they type they try to read my poetry  
They try to learn They know I teach  
But it eludes their grasp  
Ganesh from Hebbagodi called:  
'I was about to die... kill myself...  
Yaraana saved my life!  
Am I crowing? Or crying?  
Nambisan (Vijay) talks of going dry  
He always addresses me like a lover  
a suitor  
(Though he's as straight as a pin)  
He was walking through a bog  
He was wide awake when they pumped his stomach  
He knew he was a slob  
Both in drink And knowing a drunkard's stink He was god  
What made him so human?

Poetry doesn't make anything happen  
 But in giving wisdom it saves us a lot of trouble...  
 Is that why  
 Everyone And every era of my life appear interchangeable?  
 So that then we exchanged bodies  
 now we exchange souls  
 (what the saints call 'pity')  
 Is that why everyone appears so close  
 And so remote from me?  
 Afternoon is the glycerine hour:  
 We navigate its fog  
 May be those who read my words  
 Look for a raft on the flood  
 But, first they must drown:  
 'Forever wilt thou run and she be fair'  
 (Was she ever really there?)  
 Is this why Nambisan goes mad  
 and /mocks my line on the night when pearls are ground  
 and drunk?  
 When Catullus records the fall of Cleopatra  
 for Rome  
 He does not forget to understand a defeated queen's need  
 for beauty  
 Is ours only a difference in practise  
 of poetry  
 Both being poets for solid reasons?  
 (Modern criticism sez the reasons don't count)

And what is Uncle Ez doing in all this?  
 —To refine the language of the tribe  
 Refine / Define  
 A tribe of versifiers scattered like his seed  
 throughout the world  
 He gave me prose  
 —Thank you, very kindly for the prose  
 thou shalt not poeticise!  
 'Is Beauty half of the religion?  
 Ananda asked  
 —'No, Ananda. It is all of it  
 said the Buddha...

"

## **I slept with the sorrow of Palestine**

I slept with the sorrow of Palestine  
And woke up with a wound of Kashmir

### **About the Poet**

"I, a male homosexual Parsi, Christian by education, Hindu by culture, Sufi by persuasion", is how Hoshang Merchant describes himself. Born in 1947, he has authored books of poetry, literary commentary, translations, memoirs, and anthologies including *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India* (1999) and most recently *Secret Writings of Hoshang Merchant* (2016). In the mid-1980s, Hoshang made Hyderabad home and taught generations of students at the English Department of University of Hyderabad till he retired in 2012. *My Sunset Marriage* represents the life of Hoshang Merchant told through the best poetry he has written over forty years.

### **Chronology of the Complete Works of Hoshang Merchant**

- 1989: *Flower to Flame*. New Delhi: Rupa Publicationa.
- 1989: *Stone to Fruit*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 1990; *In-Discretion: Anais Nin.\** Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 1991: *Yusuf in Memphis*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 1991: *Hotel Golconda*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 1995: *The Home, the Friend and the World*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 1995: *Jonah and the Whale*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 1996: *The Heart in Hiding*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 1996: *Love's Permission*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 1997: *The Birdless Cage*. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 1997: *Talking to the Djinns.\** Kolkate: Writers Workshop.
- 1999: *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India.\** New Delhi: Penguin,.
- 2004: *Bellagio Blues*. Hyderabad: Otherwise Books, Spark-India.

- 2005: Pondicherry Poems. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 2005: Homage to Jibanananda Das. New Delhi: Aark Arts.
- 2006: Bombay, My Bombay. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 2006: Alif/Alpha: Poems. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 2006: Juvenilia. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 2007: Goa. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 2008: Forbidden Sex/Texts: New India's Gay Poets.\* New Delhi: Routledge.
- 2008: Sufi Tree. New Delhi: Allied Publishers.
- 2010: Indian Homosexuality.\* New Delhi: Allied Publishers.
- 2010: Shillong Suite. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 2011: The Man Who Would Be Queen.\* New Delhi: Penguin.
- 2011: Collected Works, Volume 1: Hyderabad Quartet. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 2012: Collected Works, Volume 2: Jonah Quintet. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 2013: Sufiana: Poems. New Delhi: HarperCollins.
- 2014: Collected Works, Volume 3: Place/Name: Sextet. Kolkata: Writers Workshop.
- 2016: Secret Writings of HM. Delhi: OUP
- 2016: My Sunset Marriage: 101 Poems. Delhi: Navayana
- 2018: Collected Poems Vol 4. Calcutta: Writers Workshop
- 2019: Gay Icons of India. Delhi: Pan Macmillan
- 2019: All my Masters. Bombay: Queer Ink
- 2021: Rebel Angel: Essays. Odissa: Dhauri Books