

Nabarun Bhattacharya's Poems

Self-advertisement (one)

I don't want to be a paperback
Thrown away after you've read it,
Pages coming loose from their binding.
I don't want to be an expensive hardback
Left to the care of soft dust and silverfish on a high shelf.
I don't want to be either of these.
I want you to remember me like a rhyme you learnt in childhood
Or shouted aloud like a lawless handbill
I want you to accept me naturally
As you've learnt to accept grief.

Warning

On the other side of the Jirat bridge
The newly planted kadam trees, lacking intelligence
Grow by leaps and bounds.
Pruning's going on in the sky
I saw a kite's two wings on the street today.

Someone's scrawling across the city
That the sun goes round the earth.
On the underground platform I wait for someone
In cold expectation.
Sounds, light: a travelling coffin
Rushes towards me.
Since everyone says that the city
Is altering its appearance at breakneck speed,
Listen, then.
Fasten your seat-belts tightly,
Put out your cigarettes.

What kind of city is this

What kind of city is this
That forgets its sparrows
What kind of city is this
That forgets its warriors, whores and poets
What kind of city is this
Where multi-storeyed crematoriums rise into the sky
What kind of city is this
Where dogs and trams are about to be banned
What kind of city is this

Where trees shut their eyes in fear

What kind of city is this

Where one can't hear drumbeats any more

What kind of city is this

Where fake eunuchs dance in the newspapers everyday

What kind of city is this

Where one, licking his fingers to count banknotes, turns out to have no tongue

What kind of city is this

Where plastic bags can vote

What kind of city is this

Where writers burn out like cigarettes

What kind of city is this

Where students blind from birth are battered to death on blackboards

This city is dead

My last wish for it – a grenade.

Balloons

A man wearing blue safety-glasses is welding

At this, streaks of lightning decided to flash

A cat was startled out of sleep

A man pushes a huge block of ice
In the market, night-blind flies sit on the wires
From which light-bulbs hang. Dead fish don't fear the cold.

A man is pulling along a garbage van
Full of flowers, bones, peelings, plastic bags, empty liquor bottles
The whole world is turning into a rubbish dump.

Those whose bombs blew a boy's hands off
Have sent him two artificial ones
Those who lost their heads weren't so lucky.

All that happens doesn't find mention in literature
The whole of literature has taken possession of a void
In which, filled with sighs,
A few balloons try to float.

Last Wish

When I die
The house that I've built of words
Will collapse in tears

Not surprising

The mirror in the house will wipe me away
The walls won't have my pictures on them
I never liked walls
The sky will be my wall then
And the birds will write my name on it
With chimney-smoke
Or the sky will be my writing-desk
The moon my cold paper-weight
And stars will be pricked into my dark velvet pin-cushion

I won't remember myself and feel sad
My hand doesn't tremble as I write this
But when I first held your hand
My hand trembled
Part passion, part shyness

My beautiful wife, my beloved
My memories will surround you
You needn't cling on to them
Build a life for yourself
My memory will be your comrade
If you love someone

Give them these memories

Make him your comrade
But I'm leaving it all to you
I believe you won't make a mistake
When you teach my son his letters
For the first time, teach him
To love people, sunlight, stars
He'll be able to solve difficult problems
He'll understand the algebra of revolution
Better than me
He'll teach me to walk in a rally
On stony ground or on grass
Tell him about my faults
Let me not scold me

My dying isn't such a great matter
I knew I wouldn't live long
But my belief never wavered
Overcoming every death
Denying all darkness
Long live the revolution
May the revolution live forever

Something's burning

Something's burning

In a corner, untimely, under the mattress, in the crematorium,

Something's definitely burning

I can smell the smoke

Someone's lit a cheap tobacco twist

Someone's squatting over a clay stove, blowing on the coals

Someone's put a shrivelled baby

Dead of enteritis, on a funeral pyre

Flaming birds tumble from the sky

Somewhere, a gas cylinder has exploded

There's a fire in a coalmine, in a fireworks factory

Something is burning

All four corners have caught fire

The burning mosquito net will descend on you as you sleep

Something's burning

The stars burn, the spacecraft with its crew is on fire

Entrails, gut are afire with hunger

The youth's afire with love

The body of desire burns, chaff, cotton soaked in machine oil

Something's definitely burning

You're hit by a blast of heat

Buildings, moral values, huge portrait hanging somewhere

Promises, television, rare books
Something's burning
I'm rummaging through everything to find
What's burning, where
What's causing the blisters on my hands
Something's burning, something's caught fire
Burning quietly, burning in silence
But if a storm comes it'll suddenly burst into flame
I'm telling you, something's burning
Fire engine, umbilical cavity, sun
Something's burning
In front of everyone, right before your eyes,
Amidst all the people
Homeland!

Tram

I too am dying out from Calcutta, tram.
Written off because I'm too slow, obstinate, unprofitable:
Dark when untouched by electricity,
I too become night-blind, stupid:
Like a beached dolphin, nose down, motionless.
No one will put up with these old crocks any more;
Now it's all fast food, debentures, shares, smart money.
Better for both of us to get out of it all,

Isn't that so, tram?

No one will take you on the second Hooghly Bridge, tram.

No one will take you to Salt Lake, to the Taj Bengal,

To the marshes of Greater Calcutta, the reckless curves of the Bypass.

Does Madonna's wild tempo ever

Make its way into a sonorous alap or jod?

Many years from now, indeed,

Your lights slipping away at night on the Maidan

While here and there, strung around temple or church,

Bells ring out a message;

Each ticket like a page of poetry,

The conductor-librarian,

The ancient driver –

all this will become antique Egypt,

The vanquished will be lost in the depths.

Yet, tram, with you

the protest march held step;

And sitting in your second class carriage

the poet of rallies

Sang untunefully,

songs of revolt and freedom.

With your three eyes and rain-soaked lights you were
the unearthly transport of lovers.

I too am being written off in Calcutta, tram.

I too from networks overhead
visible or invisible, draw no dreams.

Tram, I too am being taken off
because I'm too slow, awkward, unprofitable.

In the end, tram, the people of Calcutta
Will lack the word 'outline';
Nothing but set hymns; no one
will so much as sing a song of rejection.

Like a patient refused entry at hospital after hospital,
Like an injured boxer or football player,
In hurt pride, insult, neglect,
scrapped by the profit principle,
We too are dying out from Calcutta, tram.

-----Translated by Supriya Chaudhuri