



The Chinar Garden

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Preface

This small book is a collection of some recent and a few very old poems. The title alludes to the garden of the thousand chinars, situated on the Dal Lake in Srinagar, that nestled a college at which I spent five magical years as a student.

The chinari is known for its comforting shade, pleasant even in the hottest afternoon, as refuge for the weary traveler. Under its shade one tends to forget one's current situation and mind's theatre begins to go over other journeys.

Subhash Kak

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Part I: Journeys

1. THE TRAVELER

The traveler in his drafty room
late at night
is exhausted by the rain;
he has counted shadows
across the dark wall
of his room
when lightning struck
again and again.

It is getting colder
and from the changed beat
from the tin-roof
he knows that
it is beginning to snow.

He is reminded
of the celebration at home
for the first snowfall --
the family huddled around the furnace
drinking of hot soup and tea
boisterous games
under the kerosene lamp
snatches of stories heard
and the girl from the neighborhood
with bewitching eyes.

He plays a hill-song
on his flute
that lifts above
the patter of the rain
and the thump of the snow
sliding down the roof
to the married caretakers
who creep closer
to each other.

2. AT THE CROSSING

Journeying for several days
in heat and dust
across the desert,
sheets of rain
deluged us
as we reached
the great congregation
on the expanse
where two rivers meet.

I had marched alone first
and then joined a group
but in time I became
like a drop in a swollen stream
rolling along to
the vast gathering.

Light and dark
the waters met.

Beneath the outer calm
beyond the inner churning
some made the crossing
to the other side.

3. LOSS AND LOVE

The sparrow that built its nest
feeds the chicks without rest.
Why does the sparrow toil?
The chicks will fly away
one day.

An eagle swooped down
and stole the chicks.
The sparrow darts here and there,
searching in corners
picking twigs
letting out shrill screams.

What is love?
A mirror to an expansion,
it is like rain
on a mountain path
on a steamy afternoon
on a track that goes
round a bend.

Some tracks
fall off the mountain.

4. A PRAYER

It was from prayer books
that I learned to adore you with names.

Words are like bamboos
lashed together
across a mountain chasm.

When I lost my path
I needed more than words
to join my journey.

I have seen your image now.
The music of your creations
has become one with me
and I know that worship
is the happiness of walking
to the wilderness.

Words bind---
the smile on your face
has liberated me.

5. ACROSS THE TABLE

Across the table
in the crowded room
I found two big pools
of your eyes.

Behind the quiver
of your lips
and shy sideways glances
I saw many hidden selves --
creatures of the depths
in a mountain lake.

There was a longing for love
beyond mind and motherhood
a fear of fullness
dying and rebirth.

6. STORM IN BATON ROUGE

The storm has hung over us for days:
the rain looks like drops in a hall of mirrors.
The ground beneath the crepe myrtle is red
with fallen flowers and decaying leaves.

Gusts of wind catch the rain and smash it
against my window like the beat of a musical score.
The churning of the red dust in the garden
has yielded a shallow pool
where a dried branch has become a raft for ants
trying to reach the sheltered corner of the wall.

I go to the back porch to bring things inside
and find a frog in my outdoor shoe,
descendent of other frogs in previous years
who have made that shoe their home.

The shivering birds in the branches
Are braving it out;
my own parrot follows me around the house
repeating the same tune as if asking:

When will the rain stop?

7. DESERT ROAD

Driving towards the setting sun
in the only car on the highway
through the unending cactus-fields on the mesa
I think of past journeys
over the *kumkum* fields of Pampore.

After the ritual of coin-offerings at the road shrine
the driver begins the climb to the plateau.
I feel alone in the straining, crowded bus
crossing the yellow splash of saffron,
with the hills dappled in different lights.
Soon, darkness loosens her skirt
over the rim of the mountains.

This is a short evening
the curtain fell quickly.
I shiver in the cool air
streaming through the open windows of the bus.

I do not know that the chamber
that holds the memory of this journey
will be opened by the cacti
in the desert.

8. TEA-HOUSE IN BUSAN

The tea-house stands on the rise on the hill road
elegant reminder of old tradition
it offers comfort to weary travelers.
Over tea cup,
the jasmine mingling with the blossoms on the trees,
I could see the road
snake into another valley
and on the west
the sea and the setting sun.

The place is quiet now
but for tourists posing for pictures
against the view from the deck
under the curving, ornate roof.

For tea we must walk across
to the restaurant beyond the hill
where nubile girls entertain
singing to guitars and harp.

9. MANILA PALIMPSEST

Memory's many layers on the canvas when peeled
splendour of the shamanic past,
hazy image of Panyupayana,
north Indian islands,
traders searching for gold
silver, spice and beauty.

It is distilled at the Villa Escudero plantation
two hours away
through lovely little settlements.
Here meet water and village,
tradition and quest for gold,
old and new.

Sit on a chair on the shallow river bed
or wade your way across to the edge of the waterfall
listen to your own voice in the muffled noises
of the excited picnickers.

I walked over to the museum
to see the likenesses of the old chiefs
and counted the fifty-four beads
of an old rosary.

10. MIRROR

Going up the mountain path,
guided by the cawing of the raven,
pulled by the scent of wild flowers
and forest pine,
I hear the faint gurgles of a rivulet.

This journey to nowhere brings calm
like the trek in the rolling sands of the desert
the cacti fields of the highland
the ocean-edge
seeing the setting sun
on a distant island.

Calm is loving,
seeing oneself mirrored
in another pair of eyes.

11.RAIN

It is the rainy season again
but like always
I've forgotten my umbrella at home.

I am stranded now
in the bazaar
waiting for the rain to stop
watching cars in the street
through the gaps in the sheet of water
falling beyond the awning.

Waiting,
watching each other
through a cloak of detachment,
imagining lives
from appearances,
joking,
we move closer,
planting our feet,
a wee bit closer..

Then suddenly
the sun broke through the clouds
and as the falling drops
broke into many rainbows
we hurried to our next station.

12. SIGNS

Before an earthquake
animals turn anxious
snakes and rats
leave their holes
dogs wail.

Birds know the time
when they must fly
to their summer stations
on flights
thousands of miles long.

How do they prepare
for such journey?

We don't know
what we must do.
All we remember
is that we have lost
something.

That's why we are looking around
for signs
in strangers' eyes
in random events
seeking
friendships
longing
for new voices
to tell us
what we must do next.

Perhaps the signs are already there
around us
screaming
but we don't recognize.

13. REMEMBERING HOME

Home is not the place
where I was born
it is a corner of my mind
with its coded sounds
smells
the sharp seasons
which
appears to be lost
in the heap of my memories.

Senses are dull now
airconditioning has banished
the seasons.

Separated from the rhythms
of cosmos
from voices of children
and animals
separated
is the body and soul
in pain.

14. LURKING PAST

Beneath appearances
lie nails
and dead selves.

It is not true
that only the present matters.
The past hides behind the present
in a thousand different shadows
that stretch and shrink
what lies before us.

15. FALLING STARS

Man is a rock
that is weathered
by rain, wind and snow.

Man is a falling star
burning bright
to scatter into
many rocks.

Man is a flame
that feeds off itself
to rise into the sky.

He is a bolt of lightning
that illuminates
the shape of things
foretells the coming of rain.

Man is a root,
entwined with others,
that nourishes the plant
whose dried flowers
dot the rocks
in the landscape.

16. WHY I HAVEN'T REPLIED

I haven't replied
to your messages
because the line has been noisy
and I've not been sure
if it was you
or someone else.

The phone rings
and there is a hurried hello
the voice seems like yours
but I am not fully sure
and as I eagerly wait
for the next words
it becomes more crackly
and I can't catch
what you are saying.

I blurt out
where I am going
and how the weather is
pretending I had heard you
and then I just hang up

believing that you'd think
that the line went dead.

17. CHILDREN

Children are our teachers
they show us our blind spots
and we see
what irks us about them
is present
in us too.

Our children show us
in their excitement
their dreams
and our concern
is that we may be unable to hide
how much life will disappoint.

Children insist
they must do
what we hoped
but were afraid to do.

They are more honest
because they see themselves
in us
and often
forgive us.

18. IN UPTOWN NEW ORLEANS

In this town of cafes
and jazz
I felt a connection
to my city of youth--
Delhi.

This link is the sense
of wilted flowers
of forgotten shapes
and colours.
It is the joining of college days
across two generations:
my father, me
and my son.

But New Orleans drowned –
trees uprooted
knocked down power poles
sealed moldy refrigerators
curbside.
As soldiers kept residents
out of the city,
we saw
a lonely,
starving dog
keep guard at the door
of his abandoned home.

In Delhi, the mayhem is different:
disguised bombers
from the enemy's secret army
shoot teachers and artists
and revelers in the street.

19. BOONE, NORTH CAROLINA

Near the highest hills
of the eastern continent
meditators in the hall
search for solace
in escape
from Leviathan.

Sun is streaming through the cool breeze
in the courtyard
of the vegetarian restaurant
on the main road
and then students arrive --
dressed up
to show support
for the local football team

We climbed Grandfather Mountain
that evening.

20. LAFAYETTE

Research buildings
where professors
use their combinatorial intelligence
to think of new molecules
and circuits
that would make them rich.

My brother and I
walk through this cold city
trying hard to weave it
into the tapestry of the memories
we had with our father
fifty years ago
along the banks of
Kulgam's Vishav river.

The river bed was vast
filled with boulders
and the water flowed
in middle in the deeper channel
like a silver ribbon
where the bridge was a
narrow plank.
I lost my balance
and fell in the water.

Here walking
by the dark waters of wide Wabash
I see nothing like the ancient temple

with its springs
the well-trodden train
the wayside vendor
the voices of the playing children
to calm my heart.

21. CLOUDY WINTRY DAY IN BOSTON

My window overlooks Harvard square
and on this cloudy morning
I watch the pedestrians
cross the streets
avoiding iced puddles
on the pavement
darting to the bookshop
and restaurants
alighting from buses.

I am reminded of the view
from my room
at the main bazaar
near Nagabal in Anantnag.
They had different caps
and they wore loose pherans
but the same spirit moved them
as they shopped
and assembled at the corner
to catch the morning bus
to Pahalgam.

22. HARWAN'S POND

It was the picnic at Harwan
with the carpets spread on the grass
and the women making tea
in the samovars
while the men
politely nodded.

We raced around
the sloping encampment of the pond
playing children's games
falling
rolling –
the other picknickers
surely thought
that college education
had crazed us.

There is an ache now
to be on that ground
to trace the hill.

23 WINTER'S DISCONTENT

There is not much to show
for the labour of the previous seasons.

What has seemed a triumph
in the bright light of the summer sky
has turned dull,
and insignificant.

If I had not done what I did
it wouldn't have changed the world.

I think no one noticed
the designs we drew on sand
and in the corn fields
and now it doesn't matter
since the harvest has been done.

24. CAPRI

The mountain in the sea
witness to the fires of Vesuvius
witness to the defilement
of the temples to the gods.

Now the refuge
from the cloying symmetry
of the city and the
emptiness of the farm.
Here come those
tired of the beauty
of the city's pavilions
and the falseness
of its spectacles.

There are no deceptions here.
The temples of Rome and Napoli
may have fallen
even Capri's altars razed
but the gods still reside here
in the wind that rises suddenly
and the force of water
smashing the sides of the boat
that brought us here.

We walk the lanes
of Capri and watch the boats
in the blue, blue sea
as we eat gelato
and then turn to see the revelers
dance tarantella.

Capri is not just for lovers.
It is solace to Europe
separated from its past
terrified of the future
here pagan gods beckon
pointing to
the mirror within
and on the mountain slopes
for answers.

Part II: Across the Waters

25 THE ROLLING WHEEL

1.

In the deepest night, as Moon arose
Over countless stars in a million rows
The darkness sped away –
And I lay down on the grass for repose.

2.

In the garden of thousand chinars in the vale
I viewed my life: a moment in the cosmic scale
My happiness drained –
I felt my life and works were to no avail.

3.

Who really cares for a note that has died?
Should we not wish for things to abide
For ever and always?
I held my face in hands and cried.

4.

Who is my Maker and why did he make?
And why if he made, from knowledge's lake
He gave us little?
And he would, would his power be at stake?

5.

Is he afraid that his earthen toy
Will lose the power to enjoy
His fleeting life?
And in despair he will himself destroy?

6.

As I looked around, I heard an old man cry:
Ah pain! I've learnt that to live one must die.
Each day is misery
The price for breathing is too high.

7.

Let not the Earth dance to the Sun
Let the universe be once again unspun
That for ever ends
The meaningless race of our lives we run.

8.

Let not the foolish dream continue
Let black be turned what is brilliant hue
Let eternally recede
The deceiving sky that shines so blue.

9.

Illusion fills the mind with dread
Of the time when night will hang lifeless and dead
And morning
Leads to more darkness in Sun's stead.

10.

If good luck should us bring
To a day that has ever been shining
And would ever shine.
Shall we be able to see, hear, or sing?

11.

Won't an everlasting day daze our minds?
And we search for happiness like the blind
Who will colors define?
Never in darkness does man glory find.

12.

Can it be that no night, no day
Will follow when the dimming ray
Of night is gone?
Ah, where and when will then we stay?

13.

If the gods made us, then why so weak
That I must crumble before I can speak
Before I know
Before I can grasp all that's sad and bleak.

14.

As the man said this, he crumpled to the earth.
While a sheep said: Keep faith for birth
Of Art must be again.
A new being will rise from this broken earth.

15.

The previous state of the soil will ensure
If the coming crop is rich or poor
And the basic laws
Will be the same whether you're sweet or sour.

16.

As globes must follow and seasons chase
And paths are etched in the vilest maze
In proper time
Light will shine through this haze.

17.

Many say that God is cruel
But your fate is what you did yourself spell
In past life.
And now you must face heaven or hell.

18.

Fear not! With faith as friend
And with noble thoughts as faith, boldly wend
Though life's dark desert.
Then He will joyfully you with Himself blend.

19.

Now I saw another form that seemed made
Of motor parts, in symmetry laid.
It announced its triumph
Which looked more pitiful than can be said.

20.

The Robot said: Don't be fearful for we conquer
The haughty gods in whose judgment's fear
We have lived
At the cost of our joys, hopes, and more dear.

21.

Man has followed the One that could never be
He is in chains though he was born free
His folly
Lead him to a state sadder than one can see.

22.

Follow me! I'll show you how to conquer God.
Then in victory, we will tread the road
To countless worlds.
No man will serve, for he will be the Lord.

23.

The universe will play at our will
And with science we'll foolishness still
Even create new man
From nothingness for sweet thoughts to fill.

24.

Walking away from this, I thought of fate
And its twin: idea of heavenly state.
For if he makes us kill
Why should he, at judgment, be irate?

25.

It seems that life is like the peal of a bell
That starts in nothing and later shall
End in nothingness.
Can we free ourselves from the striker's spell?

26.

Can the bell know if it ever rung before?
And why should it not, in time, ring more?
Is this the mystery
Life holds. No other wisdom in store?

27.

All that's born must one day die
One will be a lifeless log though *Why*
One may cry.
The thing will happen no matter what we try.

28.

You ask me to write my sorrowful tale.
No! I've grieved enough. What use to rail
At something that won't move.
If I would, more grief will flood my heart's vale.

29.

What's my story? I lived and died.
And who about deepest pain can write?
Why shed tears
When unknown in world I can abide.

30.

Do you think my grief will Sun or Earth shake
They have seen more misery. They'd hardly quake.
When we're no more
Like always they'd sleep and wake.

31.

I hope the world doesn't my memories envy
Let them sleep where they lie
And you, O Lovely One,
When you pass this chinar, just sigh.

32.

I'll smile that my absence some will feel
In my hear it may some wounds heal
And the future
I'll ready to face with more steel.

33.

I know, as I sleep, the brilliant Morn
Would again rise; the Moon will also be born.
And the Rolling Wheel
Like always, for its goal, will roll on.

February – March 1964
Anantnag

26. AWAKENING

When the first light
 Opened my eyes to pulsating life
 I felt around
 And felt the force of form.
 Curled up and protected
 I looked out
 And aped: so learnt.

I wove strange patterns for creation
 Ruled by mysterious forces.
 But of the symbols of my world
 None acted as I expected
 Until I knew their secret.
 Amongst the living too
 I saw an order
 Governed by a vision,
 Secret password to sensibility.

The word can't be disobeyed
 Smallest breach leads to a slippery path
 To contradiction.

This grief can be avoided
 If the word too
 Is dispensed with in a cosmic sacrifice.

21 January 1968
 Delhi

27. DONKEYS

The window of my room
 Opens on a quarry
 Where the laborers load donkeys.

The donkeys do their part
 Quietly... calmly
 Walking in line ahead of the driver
 Never straying from the shortest path
 Like machines
 Their dreamy eyes seem fixed
 On some splendid vision in their minds.

No sound escapes their throats
 They prod on at an even pace
 While the driver stops
 Grimaces with pain
 Or beams at some private joy
 Jumping up and down with monkeyish gestures
 He catches up with the train

That quietly stops at the destination
For its load to be taken off.

I have seen this countless times
Can even tell the donkeys apart
Yet I can't help taking leave from work
To have another look at the scene:
Their nature is so mysterious
Beyond understanding.

I wonder how they get into their trance-like states
How manage to remain uninvolved.
Never needing to communicate.

I wish I knew their tongue
I would question them
To know their secret to tranquility.

But I may fail to wake them from their trance
Or perhaps they are mute.

14 April 1968
Delhi

28. FEAR

In the heat of the battle
There is no moment to grieve
For fallen friends and foes.

As one advances
Breaking memories right and left
One is scattered
Into infinitesimal fragments ...
Into nothingness.

Helpless by circumstance
Like tree bound to earth
As it is sawn and cut.
How can it feel anything?

Fear arises only when
You can change things.

11 June, 1966
Faridabad

29. DEATH

My friend is critically ill.

I return home from the hospital in the
Evening and go to bed.

But sleep I cannot.
As I lie tossing, a vision rises before me.

My friend is dead.

I see myself choked with sorrow,
Tears streaming from my eyes,
Consoling my friend's wife.

But what can consolation do to a departure,
A death?

I am dazed, stupefied,
Staring vacantly at the funeral
Thinking of the futility of it all
Of the lack of redemption.
Slowly I sink into a sea of forgetfulness.

Next morning, I rush to the hospital.

The waiting room is full of acquaintances
With sorrowful looks and wet eyes.
My friend's wife is sobbing in a corner.

My friend had just died, I know.
But my mind is vacant,
My face blank,
And I am speechless.

My acquaintances stare at me
Wondering at my ill manners
My lack of grief.

But what do they know? Yes, what do they?
Have I not grieved – I know how sorely –
When for me he died last night.

17 October, 1970
Delhi