

I AM A STRANGER HERE

AUTHOR'S NOTE

These poems have been written over a period of five decades. The first was written in March 1940 when I was a student in England, and the last one as recently as two months ago. They have been arranged in chronological order.

Some of these poems appeared in journals in the U.K. during the war, but it is impossible to trace them at this distance of time.

In view of the long time-span, there is naturally a change in the style of writing. But I hope the spirit animating them has been more or less constant. These poems represent my reaction to my environment and therefore may be considered as an emotional autobiography.

I AM A STRANGER HERE

1

Our village, my entire world;
The village tank, my ocean
Where I sailed my little boats.
And the village fair, held once a year
My paradise on earth.

The school teacher, a God know-all;
The temple priest, a God all-powerful;
And the far-off city
From where I got my new clothes,
My distant heaven.

Every peasant's cottage, once my home,
Every tree, a landmark;
Every grown-up person, my friend,
And every passing child, a playmate.
But now, I am a stranger here.

They sent me to the city
So that I might learn a foreign tongue,
And be a pride to the village,
I attended school and college,
Learn new things, strange truths
That made me unhappy.
I read unusual books
And took them seriously.
I met strange people,
They were different from me.
Slowly, I became one of them.
But my sentimental heart
Was still longing for my village home.
Now, I am back;
But now, I am a stranger here.

The silent reminders of a dead past
The fading initials on the tree trunk,
The hole in the school desk
For which I was punished.
The stone in the corner,
The wobby pillar still supporting
The choultry roof-seem immortal.

Memory, I embrace you with all my heart,
Shower all my love on you.
You rise and greet me at every turn,
You are my only friend here.

I walk down the village lane;
The whitewashed temple stands
In all its age-long dignity.
But God has changed his abode.
I do not feel his presence.

Many an open door
Where smiling faces welcomed me
Is now shut.
The girls are shy and do not talk,
The men are very polite,
Because I am grown up
And educated at college.

I pass the village school
Where under stern discipline
I had learnt the alphabet,
But the children playing there
Look at me with a suspicious eye
And turn the other way.
Because I am a stranger here.

In the cool shade of the banyan tree
The villagers sit talking.
The happy stream of conversation flows,

With eagerness, I join them.
But now, they are solemn and serious,
They enquire about my health,
When I came to the village,
And when I am returning to the city.

The evening draws to a close.
I stand by the glittering waters
Of the tank and watch the sun set.
The peasants are returning
After a hard day's toil.
My mind goes back.
I have watched the same scene before.
It was just pleasant.

Now I ask myself-
What is so beautiful in this?
So beautiful, yet so tragic for me?
I cannot tell;
I am a stranger here.

It is night.
In the verandah of the school,
By the dim light of an oil lamp,
The villagers gather to hear me.
I speak to them about the city,
Of the new things I had learnt.
Of how our leaders are struggling
To end the poverty of the village.

I tell them of great change
All over the world,
Of our own struggle
And of our own change.
They understand and cheer me.

But cheers are not what I ask;
I want to be one of them;
I want to be taken back to their fold.
I pour my heart out to them.
But they do not understand.
I crave for their love in return,
But applause is all I get.

I know they love me,
They are proud of me
And talk about me in my absence.
It is I who have lost the way
To the calm depths
Of their simple hearts.
And so, I am a stranger here.

The night is dark;
In silence and alone
I walk back to my village home.
An invisible barrier has risen
Between me and my village folk.
A personal bond, broken.

What has happened?
Why am I lonely among friends?
What unsurmountable barrier in this?
What has really happened?
With darkness as my only guide,
I wonder,
Why am I a stranger here?

Days pass.
The village is serene,
Calm and peaceful.
The people are happy and contented
They neither lament nor grumble
About their paltry existence.

The restlessness, the desire
For newer things, the glamour
Of light and colours and posters
Have left them cold
And left no trace.

But a storm rages
In my troubled mind.
Bricks of knowledge have been dropped
Into the unknown depths of my heart-
Bricks that have disturbed its stillness
And set vibrating waves of thought
In perpetual motion.

The storm rages;
My soul is caught in a whirlpool
Of restlessness that sends it
Spinning with ever increasing fury,
Breaking the bonds of hope
And smashing the pillars of faith;
For hope seems futile
And faith, blind.

That is why I am unhappy;
That is why I am a stranger here.

The gulf widens.
I sit on this side
And gaze longingly
At the opposite bank
Where the waters of life
Are still undisturbed;
Where I too was happy once.
But now I can only gaze,
And gaze again.

On my side is wind and rain,
The raging storm and the open sea,
The battleground of conflicting thoughts,
The cross currents of emotions,
An unending confusion.

And so I say farewell
To my village home,
So that I may dream from afar;
Distance does not alter
The vividness of my memory.
Dreams are pleasant
And memory beautiful
When reality is not.

Because I am a stranger here.

A lonely wanderer, I walk through life
Bonds of flesh and blood are far away
In lands beyond the horizon,
But memory rises like a solitary star
And shines across the alien skies...

Under an alien roof, I walk,
There are winds and clouds,
Rain and hail and thunderstorms.
The lone star grows dim and faint
As time recedes beneath my feet.

But a living fire burns,
The glowing fire of life
That consumes everything;
Unkindled, yet ever unceasing,
It drives me on in quest of nothingness.
I dare not disturb the leaping flames;
Like dreams, they dark through the mind,
But I can only perceive the sparks.
I can but reveal
The fragments of my dream.

I walk through a garden
Of enchanted dreams,
Through moonlit lands of gold,
Where virgin buds unfold
Their magical fragrance;
Where the moon's cool beams
Tread their light feet and dance
Over the stillness of the lakes.

Along the rising paths I walk;
On plots of green velvet I lie
And watch the distant hills
That always seem too far.

Of things far, far away I dream,
Of things great and unattainable,
Of things undefinable.

I build a pedestal out of my heart
And decorate it with my youthful dreams.
I place a Goddess on the throne
And dare not leave her a moment alone.

Yet I walk on...
Leaving the Goddess and the throne,
Suffering all alone.
My Goddess and my dreams are lost;
The visions are forever past.

My mind is reflected in the magical mirror
Of youthful imagination.
Fanciful images rise till they reach
The deluding feet of the Goddess of fame
And shrink as the mirror turns,
Until it is smashed against
The rock of reality.

I am not awake,
And the morning light is here.
My mind is sad but clear.

I am awake and my heart is full,
Ready to empty itself
Into the nearest fountain.

I crave for the touch of unseen hands
And long for unknown lips.
Feminine charms attract me.
Young blood boils with passion
At the caress of soft white hands.

But it not enough;
There is no bosom
Where I can bury my tired soul,
Where I can shed the silent tears
Of love and longing.
There is no fountain
To empty the heart that is full.

Through great cities I walk;
Cities with pride
As their noblest monument.
I have seen their monuments
Blown to dust.

Alone, I walk.
Alone amidst the throng
Of crowding men with empty faces,
Those dull grey masks
That hides their thoughts
And visions from the world
And from themselves.

To them, I listen;
To them, I talk
Of films in town,
Of planes coming down,
The talks on the wireless,
The gossip in the press.

But what do I know of them?
What do they know of me?
The vague mental struggles,
The deep emotional yearnings
And the fond dreams-
To whom can I reveal these?
And how can I?
How can I reveal the secrets
That I dare not admit
Even to myself?

We talk, we listen,
And we talk again.
We meet, we disperse,
And we meet again.
We are afraid to be alone;
Yet, who is more alone?

How can words penetrate the masks
Or reveal what is behind them?
Words, those minute searchers
For flaws on the surface-
They are but poor substitutes
To explore the hidden secrets
Of the heart.

Words, more words
That act as camouflage
For inner thoughts,
For suppressed instincts,
Seeking pride and glory
In every uttered phrase.
Those arrows, poisoned and invisible,
Shot through ethereal space
In waves, short, medium and long,
Aimed at targets already drugged
By many a former attack.

Words, sweet words
That act as catalysts
To the invariable ingredients
Of good manners and hypocrisy,
And produce all the requirements
Of respectability.
Even the strange emotion
Of synthetic love, stripped
Of all the natural warmth of feeling,
Readymade and available
For all occasions, switched

On or off as required,
Limited by many an artificial bond
Of caste, colour or creed.

Men sit by the silent streams
Under the protecting trees of faith.
They admire the skies
With their eyes closed; listen
To the music of the voiceless birds
And breathe the air
Of blissful contentment.
“Probe not too closely
Into the mysteries of the Universe,”
They say, “less thou offend thy Maker.”
I only laugh and walk on.

My mind walks through desert tracks
Of knowledge, endless paths
That merge with the horizon.
Here, there is no shade,
No gentle breeze or cool stream;
Only hot sand, hot air, hot skies,
All burning with new ideas,
And scorching every step that mind takes.

Graves of faded yesterdays
Line the paths, yesterdays cold and dear,
But their epitaphs sing their praise
And memory fondly clings to them,
While their ghosts obstruct the path.
Who can escape their past?

Newton, Einstein,
Darwin, Marx and Freud,
These are the signposts
And they seem to converge.

They tell me how everything happens;
But I am still restless.
I wonder why anything happens.

They tell me how;
I wonder why.
Alone I venture further on.

The paths grow wild,
They are no longer well preserved
Or marked by iron arguments.
But thirsty for reality.
And hungry for truth,
I walk on into the wilderness
In quest of nothingness.
Only the eternal question
Stares me in the face-
The why and the wherefore of things.
Here is the conflict
Between the "how" and the "why"
Beyond reason and emotion,
Beyond faith and lack of faith,
Beyond argument and belief,
The conflict rages between mind and soul.
Can the "how" explain the "Why"?
Can the mind understand the soul?

But I am a scientist;
I analyze and I rationalize.
Human emotions are the chemicals
That I use for my experiments.
I analyze my own soul
Into its thousand component parts
And put them together again
The tormented soul cries out in pity;
But what pity is there
In the lonely wilderness?

Only shafts of heat
From the Sun who burns too near
The eyes are blinded,
The flesh is gnawed,
The bones turn to ashes
And the blood turns pale
By the frustration of desires.
But the struggle goes on

In this land of nothingness,
In silence and alone,
I face my Self.

Its garments have been stripped
One after another
Since it started on its journey,
The colourful robes
Were left by the riverside;
The last shreds that kept it covered
Were lost at the last signpost.

Now I tear off that final facial mask
And behold my soul.
Physical nakedness, one can bear.
But who can bear
The nakedness of the soul?

Its face is different;
Its voice is strange;
Its words are meaningless
Yet vital. It is the soul
That has driven me onwards;
It is the source of energy;
It is the glowing fire of life
Whose sparks I could glimpse
From a long way off.

Here are the two fires-
The fire within that drives me on
And the heat without that consumes me.
The longing to know why
And the reasons how;
The individual and the universal;
They submerge.

The sparks are dead,
But the larger fire burns.
The fragments are gone,
But the dream lives on.

Roused by every wind that fans the fire,
Moved by every passionate wish
Yet unmoved within,
Taking part in every folly
Yet strangely apart,
Impatient of those who walk sluggishly
Along the paths I have trodden,
Yet sure that they will follow,
I wait at my journey's end.

I wait for the heat to subside;
I wait for the evening breeze;
I wait for the red Sun to set,
For sudden darkness to spread
And shut for ever
The tired eyelids of the mind.

Let me take you on a journey
From the centre of the city,
Past the square's proud monuments,
Past the crowded streets and pavements,
Streets where you can park your fate
On odd but not on even date;
Past the narrow one-way street
Where the codes of morals greet,
Where once you go you can't retreat;
Shops where thoughts are sold in retail
Simplified in every detail;
Past the bus stops, past the tram stops
Past your mental commas, full stops;
Rules of do's and don'ts and what-not's,
Rivals all, entangled knots;
Past the bills, notice boards, sign posts,
Guides, timetables, mind's controllers
All proclaiming Man's violent boasts;
All confirming his inborn ghosts...

Past the corporation houses,
Smoking chimneys, loving spouses;
Past the crowded urban parks
And the short suburban walks;
Past the fields and watered lands,
Where your mind is grown by hands.
Let me take you over the bridge
Across the deep dividing gulf,
Past the ever vigilant guards;
Let me take you round the corner
Of that last and final turning
Where the conscious lights are warning,
And the powers of reason fading,
All the laws, self tries evading.

Ruling of conduct and persuasions,
All the morals indignations,
Scorched away by fiery passions;
Only passions, passions burning-
Let me take you past the turning....

Here's a land where wants are grown
Irrespective of seeds sown.
Here the soil is rich and fertile-
Spread with suppressed memories, rich
Desires roused to a high pitch,
And forgotten instincts which
Form the surface and the ditch.

Here there is no crowded throng,
No difference between right and wrong.
Here nobody plays the game,
No rules to make or mend or blame
And no feelings of guilt or shame.
None can paint its hues of magic
And changing views with tones of logic.
None can stand its crude demands
Nor fully break its powerful bonds.
None can probe its secret caves
Nor bring to light how it behaves.
All your thoughts and motives take
Their roots in this unconscious state,
All your signs are tinted here,
Scarlet ones are done in fear.
All your laws and rules of strife
In this land receive their life.

Time, the farmer, ploughs the ground.
He turns the soil round and round,
Mixing hunger, sex with rage;
Every furrow makes an age;
Every furrow takes an age;
Though it only takes a page
In history, it marks a stage.

Poisonous plants and flowers appear
Side by side and far and near,
Buried passions in disguise
Of love and hate, like twins arise.
Flowers of love for their own part
Sublime to fruits of music, art,
While the bitter fruits of hate
Leave the scars on human fate,
Instincts of self-preservation
Blossom out in war-like fashion.
Seeds of fear for the unknown
Into the trees of faith have grown.
Watch these products as they grow
Into the conscious lands they flow.

They cross the bridge in robes of reason,
But change them during every season.
They enrich the barren lands
And build cities in desert sands.
They create the moral laws
And legal pegs to hang their flaws.
They stud the streets with traffic lights
But rouse the mind in all its flights.
All they seek is satisfaction
Of the various wants, through action.
All your mental conflicts, deeds
Conform to these unconscious needs.

The architecture of your mind,
The city streets, the alleys blind,
Religious paths that wind and wind,
Monuments that seem permanent,
Pillars of faith dine in cement,
Distant clouds of hanging dreams,
Ruined walls by flowing streams,
Forests wild by far-off hills-
This is the world, the globe of self,
Ever changing yet unchanging,

Virgin minds their thoughts exchanging,
Stubborn stone, your conscience ranging,
Round and round the wants are racing,
Outside this world a void is facing.
Which soul dares to break its casing?

4

Mother, you will never read this.
I write in a language you do not know.
And when I speak,
My words seem strange to you.

Mother, you have faith.
Peace is the keynote of your world.
You gave me happiness,
Quietness and contentment.
I lived in the joy of ignorance.

Mother, this world of mine
Is a cruel governess.
She hurls invisible things at me.
We call them ideas
They come in an avalanche
In which happiness is drowned,
Contentment replaced
By an uneasy restlessness,
And questioning and doubt float above.
She has given me wisdom without joy,

Mother,
Perhaps you do not understand.
You cannot;
At least, forgive me.

5

Liquid pearls are dropping
On the glassy surface
Of the silent pool
And are dispersed.

Ever widening ripples
Merge with the fringe of darkness
Like waves on a midnight sea.

Into the black waters
Of sorrow fall these tears
Like rain on the midnight sea.

But deep within the caverns
A silent stillness reigns,
Of darkness unexplored,
Of sorrow undisturbed,
Like the depths of the midnight sea.

Do not think of me as a beggar,
I do not come to you, begging for your love.
I will not beg even from the Gods
Had they the power to give.
Do not give me the warmth of your body
As you would give a worn-out garment
To a child shivering in the cold.

Give me freely what you long to give;
Then, I will take you into my world
And fill your heart with rapturous dreams.

Do not think of me as a merchant,
I do not come to you bargaining for your love.
No convention of commerce
Is an adequate seal for our agreement.
No comparison, a suitable measure
For the exchange of hearts' gifts.

Do not think of me as a tyrant God
Demanding your sacrifice
At the altar of love. Let not sacrifice
But exchange of heart's desires
Be the foundation of our bond.
For, even as I take, I give.
Even as I consume, I yield.

Give me only what you have power to give;
Then, I will take you into my world
And share with you the treasures of my heart.

Here, let me lie by the fringe of darkness
And think of you, my love,
By the slanting face of a wooded hill
Thrusting its chin into the pebbled beach,
Near the unused forest tract,
Through the silent quiver of a summer night,
Through shortened darkness, let me lie;
And think of you, my love.

Here let me stretch my wearied limbs,
Watch the incoming tide embrace
The frayed edge of the broken coast.
Shut my eyes, tired from the heat of the day,
Feel the coolness of the midnight breeze
And think of you, my love.

Here let me lie in depths of darkness
And think of you, my love.
Here let me sleep till pale blue morning
Breaks beyond the brow of the sea,
Awake in the flood of the virgin light
And think of you, my love.

One summer evening, there we stood
Amid the mountain shadows,
In the fading twilight, on the dry grass
Of the vanishing meadows.

Your hand pressed against mine; your gaze
You could not hide,
The soft caress, the compelling touch
Detained me by your side.

One summer evening, we two parted;
What fond dreams were ours!
What secret thoughts, what hopes,
What regrets were ours!

Drifting alone, I found you in the storm
Of troubled waters, where strong waves
Of passion broke against the sails
Of my rudderless boat.

Drifting alone, I met you in the sea
Whose waters were stirred with new ideas,
Strong currents dragged me on to you,
Aimless, helpless, I came.

Drifting alone, we met.
Together we searched for new life
And hoped that the violence of the seas
Would toss up new hopes into the air
For us to catch.
In vain.

Drifting alone, bravely we sailed
To the gulf where no man-made laws
Of navigation hold,
Where all hearts are smashed
Against invisible rocks,
All lives drowned.

Drifting alone, we found
The gulf that unites
Is also the gulf that divides,
The gulf of death
Is also the source of life.
Drifting alone.

Drained by a hundred suppressed feelings
Your heart is dry. An empty glass,
Only its edge is used to sharpen
The keenness of your intellect.

A curtain of uncertain darkness
Covers your face and hides the light
Reflected in your eyes. Society
Makes you feel ashamed of feeling.

You drink from artificial glasses
Filled with emotions standardized
By Man and Machine. Life is fast,
Too fast even to fill your glasses.

The million living cells, each throbbing,
Your flesh and nerves, pulsating blood,
The transmitters of life are dying;
Only the sterile intellect
Issues her bald statements of death.

The frail soul that trembles
To face the coming storm,
The mind that ever grumbles
In spite of all the calm.

The heaving heart that craves,
Craves and pleads in vain;
The wounded pride that braves,
Braves in all its pain.

Deaf to the voice that prays,
Heedless of tears shed,
Blind to the life that lays
Its bosom bare in dread.

In answer mute, with threads
Of woe and joy, she weaves
Life's pattern as it spreads,
In vain the bosom heaves.

Here ends the unbroken coast of concrete
Washed by the tides of men
Who come, to forget themselves,
To find escape from tumult in greater tumult;

Here ends the severe line of distinction
Between the land and the sea
Drawn by tubular, greenish Rails.

Here the bay curves inward,
Invading the land with each incoming tide,
Invading, proclaiming its temporary sway.
But retreating as the wind changes.

Here is no human tide to wash the lonely shore
And the land slips slowly
Beneath the sea, making
Distinction vague, creating
A no man's-land of pebbled shore.

Will you climb the steep hill,
With a determined will,
Ignore all the warnings,
And take all perilous turnings?

If so, let me be your guide.

Will you tread on the bones,
And walk through laughing skulls
Of your predecessors,
Dead, embracing the rocks?

If so, let me be your guide.

Will you pitch your tent
On the perilous slopes,
And fly your gallant flag
Of multi-coloured hopes?

If so, let me be your guide.

Will you penetrate the fog
That hides the frozen heights,
With the torch of wisdom
That repeatedly fails?

If so, let me be your guide.

Will you reach the summit
And fly through sailing clouds?
Will you gaze at the stars
Or stretch your hands to Mars?

If so, let me be your guide.

The burning sun,
White heat, raw and fierce,
Beating the earth with fearful intensity,
Piercing the thick foliage of green trees,
Spreading Nature's camouflage
Of light and shadow.

The shade. Cool,
Soft, gentle and pleasant,
Wiping the sweat from every tired brow,
The wanderer's haven,
The oasis of the road-side.

Dust, red dust,
Suspended in hot air,
And occupying the entire space.

The landscape, bare and brown,
Wavy meadows,
Only cut by running telegraph wires;
Steep mountains far away
Peeping from below the horizon.

Grass, but not green.
Scorched by the pouring rays
Into yellowish brown,
Half-dead, yet alive,
Longing and waiting
For the summer showers.

Winds, sweeping winds
From across the seas and lands,
Full and fast and furious,
Burdened by clouds, dark and dense,
Pregnant with heavy rain;
Sailing majestically
To release their watery load.

Rain in torrents
Lashing in all the tropical fury,
The fearful deluge,
The moving sea of water
Creating scattered islands
Of mud walls and thatched roofs.

The violent forces of Nature
Are spent and tired out.
The battle is over; peace restored.
The sun-not so intense-shy but shining
Tries to hide his blushing face
Among pale clouds
That kiss the brows of far-off hills.

The dust settles down;
The grass feels fresh and soft,
And a mild southern breeze
Shakes away the remaining water drops
From the leaves of the trees.
The fresh, strong smell of tropical rain
Pervades the evening air.

My new-born lungs received their breath of life
From rising winds that graze these barren fields;
My eyes first cast their vacant, childish glance
On life and all its varied storm and strife,
Among these men who plot their way through life.
My skin pigmented by the torrid sun,
The winds, the lands, the silent mass of men-
All these have shaped my life.....

A brown dagger with a snow-clad hilt
Thrust deep into the heart of tropical seas;
A burning crust of beloved earth,
Combed by watery veins that drain her breast.

The land, the space, extending openness;
Unvaried heat, the floating quilts
Of feathery blue; majestic streams
Descending from the hills to give men life;
The fields where harvest bends
Her grain-rich head towards the earth,
And Nature with her changing moods.

The land of men sun-tanned for centuries,
And women with a glow of sparkling fire;
Their dreams, their simple joys;
Their hopes and griefs,
Along the narrow margin of their existence.

Their life-a surging inward flow,
Vibrating music throbbing in their veins
With age succeeding age;
Their fight against unbending fate
And things stronger than fate-
The man-made circumstance.

The land of Gods who rule our destinies
And men who claim to know them;
Of unseen powers beyond our life and death,
Of the trees of faith that blossomed in their day
And bore rich fruit, but since withered,
Clutching the earth with their dead roots.....

A land of a great and glorious past,
A past abode of hundred burning fires
That shed their divine light on the minds of men,
Now filled with blackened cinders,
Soot and smoke

Her ancient glory tranished, learning dead;
Only the phantoms proudly walk the land;
Only the symbols live, their meaning dead.
And formless ghosts of ancient wisdom haunt
The minds of men in crude, distorted shapes.

Men pinned their blinded faith in holy Gods,
They looked to the heavens above for divine hope,
Towards the distant stars for their guidance;
But always had to turn to Mother Earth-
The bare, brown soil, for their livelihood.

Those mute and powerful Gods have let them down,
The heavens above have failed to grant their wish,
The silent stars that wink their lustrous eyes
At earthly folly do not seem to care.
And Mother Earth-once loving and fruitful,
Is now a barren patch.

The social ills that still remain,
Accusing us, our past, like warning fingers
Raised against an unborn future;
The myriad homes where hunger reigns
And ignorance proclaims her away.....

But tomorrow always comes and brings with her
The dawn of hope; the morning light
Dispels the gloom; the veil of mist
That hangs across the minds of men
Is pierced by the virgin light.
And the men begin to move.

Look, a new fire has arisen
Out of the old cinders.
Stale causes, dressed
In topical clothes, leading up
To fresh arguments of iron.

The leaping fire spreads
Across this tired and ancient land,
Rapidly extending its boundaries,
Embracing all, respecting none
Within its domain;
Distributing cruel justice
Equally in all directions.

Here is the agony of a passing age;
Ghosts of the past rising from the flames,
Phantoms strutting across the nation's stage;
Distorted theories casting their shadows,
It is the deathly embrace
Of separated twins.

Thought and conception
Dried of all true vitality;
Static in a wooden framework
Of fossilized ideas.
Stable structures, so majestic,
Institutions that seemed powerful-
These are the things that burn.

It is decayed and dying age
That burns, it is the sins of the past
Consuming the present.

Fire,
Fire, the destroyer,
Fire, the consumer,
Fire, the preserver.

Destroying the past,
Rolling, spreading, ravaging,
Obliterating by burning fury
What heart refuses to forget,
Tearing up from the face of the earth
The lingering shades of memory,
Convulsing the hearts of nations.

Destroying the past,
Agonizing the present,
Laying the course for the future.

Destroying the past,
Consuming the waste, the outworn,
Eating up the dead matter,
Turning the smile of spring
Into the greyness of desolation.

Consuming the waste,
Yet preserving
That which which is indestructible-
Preserving, purifying
By reducing to the molten state
The hard core, increasing
The agitation of its molecules,
Cleansing by the ordeal, accelerating
Progress along the path of Time
By change-yet preserving life.

Fire the by-product
In the endless strife,
In the conflict of human forces
Brought into contact,
Revolving along a blazing trail,
Producing sparks at first, setting
Alight the human fuel, spontaneous,
Dynamic, stretching its sway
Into a violent mass of conflagration.

Kindled by restless souls,
Stirred to action, roused
From cinders smoldering
Under suppressed passion,
Fanned by the winds of discontent.
As old as Man himself,
Invented by his will to survive,
Still practiced, though means
Have changed, practiced, modified
Perfected as an art; aided,
Glorified, worshipped,
Yet uncontrolled by Man.

Fire,
Exploding the inert masses,
Releasing their latent energy
For action, their elemental urge
For fulfillment.

Fire,
Nature's guard against Nature's evil,
The accessory of Man, the terror
Of his folly, the self-imposed ordeal
Of right and wrong.

Persistently, the music haunts my brain,
Knocking on memory's door-
A ghost without shape or form,
Surviving the past, yet unwilling to rest.

The music haunts my brain
In my wakefulness, and in my sleep
My dreams; and yet,
I cannot sing.

No instrument can play this tune,
No voice can sing the words.
Jumbled notes and noises,
Clamouring voices of far-off days
Echoing in the hidden depths
Of what has gone before;
There is no tune
To the music in my heart.

The ear can only listen
But cannot reproduce.
The eye can only see.
The heart can only feel, but none
Can unlisten, unseen or unfeel,
None can undo that
Which has gone before.

Mind is but a broken mirror
Of what has gone before,
Each piece producing its own image
In its own angle, reflecting truly,
But producing only
A heap of broken images.

It is no aid to remember
Or to forget, only to register
What has gone before.
Only to record and to learn.

What has been seen or heard or felt
Will never be forgotten;
While the brain is haunted
By the music of the past,
What has been once will never cease to be;
There is no death to what has gone before.

For the past lives in the present
And the present in the future;
Fire destroys the past, yet preserves
The ashes and creates the future.
It consumes and it contributes
Linking the dead past
With the unborn future, linking
Receding memory
With approaching desire
Through life and time.

Time does not stand still
To anyone but the dead.
All things in life change, grow
And are changed by time.
There is no escape from growth
And change. Only death confers
Immunity from time and change.
Only death confers immortality.

The earth is tired.
Giving all, taking nothing
In return, receiving only
The sharp thrust of the plough.
Feeling the acute pain of parting
And separation; bleeding
Even at the touch of friendly hands.

Ravaged by Time and ignorant hands,
The earth no longer yields.
Ravages of Time, only time can heal;
And the ills of ignorance,
Only wisdom can cure.
And the pain of parting-
The scars of our handiwork-
Only patience can obliterate.

The earth is tired;
Creeds turned stale
Are planted in the upturned soil,
But do not take root.
Artificial manures
To rejuvenate the soil
Are of no avail,
For the earth is tired.

And there is no rain;
Other plants have failed to thrive
Out of the barren soil.
Only the cactus grows here and there
Raising its twisted, thorny head,
Shaped in cruelty, raising
New problems for the bewildered.
The earth is dry; stony.
The sun drops his quantum of heat
On her uneven face.

In vain, the spade thrust
Into the heart
Of unresponsive ground.

The earth is dry,
Unyielding to Man's embrace.
In vain, the seed is sown
On the barren soil;
Only her lips are parted
With thirst.
The earth is dry, parched.
Cracked and waiting.

To quench her thirst.
The farmer sheds
His forehead sweat;
The soldier sheds his blood;
The poet-his tears.

But the earth is made no richer
By mixing it with blood;
Nor is it made purer
By washing it with tears.
Blood and tears are wasted
On the soil; it should be tended,
Loved and nurtured,
And the ravages mended,
Before it can yield.

After long struggle
Freedom has come to us;
The fetters are broken,
The limbs free to move,
The minds free to act-
Each free to act in his own way,
In his own plane;
Each living in his own world.

Now, there is no peg to hang
Our excuses, no one to blame, abuse
Or criticize; no faith to sustain
The weak, no hope to urge the slave
No faith in Man....

For we are alone,
Each is a unit in himself,
Each is a cell, throbbing, gnawing,
Turning, each is a world in himself-
Each is a world
With private worlds to win.

For the bonds are broken
And we are still to find
A common denominator;
For the old ones are gone
And the new ones, still to come.

Standing between two worlds,
Between the past-clinging
Like a mistress overthrown-
And the future-mysterious,
Like a new love still to blossom.
The past, receding from memory,
And the future, creeping slowly on us.

Standing between two worlds,
We are afraid.
Ashamed of the past, yet
Justifying it and reluctant to part,
Afraid of the future, afraid
Of what is in store,
We live eternally in the present.
We live in the hour, in the second,
In the fleeting moment of pain
And unholy desire.

But pity is not in store,
Only the relentless march of logic...

Standing between two worlds,
We are in two minds-turning
Now towards the east and now
Towards the west-trying in vain
To reconcile the irreconcilable;
Action and reaction neutralizing
Each other, leaving behind
Only a precipitate of bitterness.

Between the world of regimented thought
And the confusion of free speech,
Moving in pre-ordained grooves
Towards a predestined future,
We seem lost.

This is the brief period
Of crossing the no-man's land
Where all is uncertain.
The brief period of twilight,
The misty light before the dawn
When figures are moving shadows
And trees are standing ghosts;
When we are awake,
But not fully aware.

Between the receding darkness
Of a passing night and the bright glare
Of the morning sun, we are lost.
Divergent changing light
Plays tricks on our vision, creating
Alternately, mirages of hope
And frustration.

Impatience marks our action,
Short cuts that lead nowhere
Seem attractive from a distance.
Reason and logic are still
A long way off; or perhaps
A long way behind.
But cause and effect,
The inevitable march of events,
Move from crisis to crisis.

Confused and bewildered,
We know not where to turn.
Some enter the flimsy shells
Of isolation and despair that offer
No protection or comfort,
And long for the days
That are dead and gone.

Some exist in the muddy pools
Of stagnation where thought stands still
From generation to generation,
Where nothing changes except time
And that too reluctantly.

Others live in the rushing torrents
Of rapid change, tossed about
From dogma to dogma, knocked about
Between the hidden rocks
Of obstruction and conflict,
For ever moving, changing, revolving

In the whirlpools of hope and desire
But not progressing.

Some thrive on the shifting sands
Of opportunism, turning
With each succeeding wind
Turning, twisting, defecting.
Between these extremes, we oscillate,
Each swing of the pendulum
Creating new tensions, creating
New problems for the bewildered.

“To what end is all this?
To what end?”

The road to Utopia is lined
With bombs and guns.
Blowing up trains,
Looting banks,
Setting fire to houses;
Incomprehensible is the horror
Of the Ultimate,
The blossoming
Of the mushroom cloud
Will not bring you spring flowers
Or love and laughter.

The bullet does not issue
From the barrel of a gun;
Nor does the grenade explode
By the pulling of a pin;
The trigger and the pin
Are pulled by the hatred
In the minds of power-crazy men.

“To what end is all this?
To what end?”

“I am the terrorist
You fear and dread;
I have a price
Upon my head.
I am the robber,
Murderer and thief;
My death will bring you
All relief.”

“But I am like God,
I am everywhere.
They can't find me
Anywhere.
They search for me in vain;
They know me only
Through my gunshot's pain.”

“To gain your ends,
You go to gaol;
But you are soon
Out on bail,
You shout slogans
When you fail,
You hurt people
Through many a word,
I merely use my sword.”

“Death comes to you
As an honoured guest;
He will give you
Eternal rest.
For my glory,
You will die.
But I am wanted,
I must fly.”

Yes, Death came calling

Without a doubt:

But I was lucky,

I was out.

He came to us when we were lost
In the wilderness of desolation
And despair, when a new world
Had overtaken us and left us
In the old; our faith had turned
Into blind belief, continuity
Was fossilized into iron conformity,
And change was heresy.
Minds and limbs were paralysed
By fear of the unknown
And the superior might of alien rule
Flourished unchallenged.

Each of us in his own cocoon
Of flimsy protection waited and hoped
That the wind of change
Would pass us by and leave us
Untouched.
We waited and shivered
As the wind penetrated
Every corner of our minds and hearts.

When we knew not where to turn,
He showed us the way; from fear,
He led us to courage; from
Vacillation to resolution; from
Hatred and frustration to love
And aspiration; from a sense
Of shame to self-respect; from
A thousand broken bits of humanity.
He built a Nation.
But we have travelled far
From the days when we turned
The spinning wheel and felt proud
Of our loin-cloth.

He moulded common clay
And produced heroes;
But his handiwork soon fell apart
And clay disintegrated into dust.
Only the mould is left behind
Making hollow noises,
Echoing his words in the emptiness
Of a new and different world.

He helped to break the chains
Of alien rule, but we could not break
The chains that bound our hearts
To a dead past. The soulless hand
Of habit guides our thoughts, regulates
Our actions, dictates the terms
Under which we shall live.

For a tyrant's iron chains
Were not for him, not
The golden logic of a scientist's mind,
Nor the heady liquor
Of a conqueror's promise.
Our brains were not washed
Nor our minds bound
To a slavery of words. He
Bound us to him with a garland
Of flowers.
But with our our weak and willful minds,
We pulled out the petals
One by one
And smelt their fragrance.

Now, only the stalks are left
Irritating our minds
And embarrassing our postures.
But we have no courage
To throw away the garland
Of empty stalks, no courage

To proclaim our faithlessness;
And we cling to the faded stalks
Just as we cling to a forgotten past.

He taught us universal love,
But we cannot extend our sympathies
Beyond our narrow world
Of lust and self-interest.
Our own universe is small,
Bound by the smallness
Of our individual minds, fenced in
By the limitations of our past,
By our desires for the future.

He taught us universal love
But we can only love
A few at a time, and that too
Imperfectly. A selfless love
Was what he gave us. We took it
And changed to corrupt, illicit love.

He sought to convert
Private virtue into public good;
But for us, public virtue
Is a means of private gain.
We have named streets after him
In every town. The dust of our feet,
The din of our conflict, the sound
Of our voices, and the blood
Of our brothers, mingle
With the silent reverence of his name.
We call him to bear witness
To the deeds we perform in his name;
Honoured, revered, worshipped,
But not followed,
He stands in every city square,
With his head bowed in shame.

I have no more tears to shed,
For this is the beginning of the end;
My eyes are dry, tired
With weeping and with keeping vigil
Without sleeping, dreaming
And longing for the promised age
That never came.

Marching towards the promised land
Of our dreams, with nothing to guide us
But the freedom of choice,
Each took the easy road of his own choosing,
Each of us made his own decision of short-cuts,
Following the lines of least resistance,
Each in a labyrinth of easy profit
And quick success.

The promised land has become
The power of numbers, enumerated
By the mere counting of heads;
To rise on the pyramid
Of other men's shoulders;
To pressurize others
To bend to our will.
Not heeding the voice of reason
The freedom of choice has become
The clamour of demands;
Pity the leadership
That let it happen.

The time that was given,
The allotted span, the promised years
Have run their course.
Now there is nothing left, only
The fragments of past hopes
From a shattered mirror that reflects

Only the bitterness of memory
And desire.

The time has run out, and now
We wait for the inevitable;
For the sum total of all our deeds
To fructify; for the present
Is the result of the past;
For every action has
An equal and opposite reaction;
For the forces resolve themselves
Again and again; what we see today
Is the resultant of what was yesterday.
Cause and effect succeed each other
With clockwork precision. The wheels
Of destiny move relentlessly for us
To enjoy the fruits of our own inheritance.

Come, my friend, let us make a bed
Out of these dead leaves of autumn
And rest.

Fleeting from flower to flower,
Smelling their sweet fragrance;
Hopping from tree to tree,
Nestling in their tender leaves;
All our lives, we have flirted
With attractive ideas
That blossomed in our garden.

Now, the trees are bare;
The flowers are all gone,
And the leaves have turned yellow;
Only the naked stalks protrude.
Like grey skeletons
Thrusting from the earth.

We have passed through every phase of love;
From the day we met, from the first word
That caused a stir, creating
A new excitement, providing
A new interest in life.
Young love blossomed out of a dull past
Like spring flowers, thrusting
From the wintry earth; wafting
A new fragrance, filling our hearts
With a new sensation.

Eyes communicated without the aid
Of words and phrases; the gentle
Touch was a sacred rite
Performed with care and devotion.
The entwined fingers, the pressure
Of toes under the desk,

Sent secret messages of love
And laughter. Yes,
Bright were the colours
That were previously drab;
The smile of strangers more pleasant,
The gardens more lovely, even the tears
Were free from salty bitterness.

Summer brought its own white heat
Of passion with violence and turmoil
When our souls mingled,
Melted and fused into one;
Yet with separate identities
Struggling hard for recognition
Of each individual self.

Love blossomed into action;
Hope turned to aspiration,
And knowledge to resolution;
The torch of freedom
Beaconed us from a far;
We shone in the reflected glory
Of its brilliance and followed it
Like moths towards a flame.
We embraced the world
And were happy in our love.

But summer passed all too quickly
And we were too blind to notice the change,
Too busy in our love of the Universe,
And with each other;
And our task, still undone.

Now, we are old, and tired,
And waiting; and the world
Is strange with new faces
Which we do not recognise.
And it is winter, a winter

Cold and hard and frosty;
And we are alone, and look longingly
At a dead and buried past.

Come, my friend, let us make a bed
Out of these dead leaves of autumn
And rest.

Come.