

JAMES K. BAXTER'S INDIAN POEMS

Air Flight to Delhi

In Thailand, song of water dwellers,
Rivers like lizards spreading
Brown silt into the sea.
Moisture in the hollow of a hand.
The old ideograph of peace
Tempted me, with card-playing
On a hard mattress, light between
Bamboo slats. Such love is contraband.

In a room taken for the night
Sluicing the chest and thighs. Dressed
In loose pyjamas. Lying
Insomniac under the giant fan.
I knew the undesired accomplice
Some sky or water demon
Twisting the locks of the mind.

Light will come at length to the dark room
Where the blind soul to its own incubus
Murmurs, 'I am.' The Goan shepherd
Sleeping at noon below the pepper vine
Is held alive in Xavier's smile,
Has diamonds to lose: but here
Egyptian darkness staggers in the sun.

Seven plagues. Black beaks of crows.
Vultures in grey dinner suits.
Nepotism and the leper's stump.
The stone of Sisyphus rolled on the heart.
These wounds that I must understand:
This country of the banyan and the ape.

The homeless in the Mogul tombs
Cannot despair because they do not hope,

On the great star wheel pulled apart
Show the disastrous innocence
Of one who murders in his sleep.

The cross is clouded here with market dust.

[Hocken MS704/19:68 CP193]

Shalimar

Guava slices pierced by a straw
Eaten with rough salt and lemon;
This orchard where the trees have made
Stadium, refectory, high tent
For water carrier and camel boy.
The mind's great door is swinging now.

The musical water washes
From mouth and hands and heart
Memory of the *peine forte et dure*
Experienced in life. With balls of clay
The bearded guardian scatters birds.

Long waiting, brief illumination:
Outside the grass hut rustles on the ground
An empty snakeskin. Characters of fire
Without origin, without curb,
On the soul's narrow walls
Blaze, as the sun strides in a broken house.

I AM THE CUP THAT HOLDS YOUR PAIN,
JANUA COELI, STAR OF TRUTH.
I AM THE ARK, THE STRONGHOLD OF THE KING,
I AM THE VOID WHERE LIGHT IS BORN.

[Hocken MS704/19:70 Unpublished]

Howrah Bridge (to my wife)

Taller than the stair of Qtub Minar
These iron beams oppress the eagle's town.
Bare heels will dint them slowly.
And swollen Gunga's muscles move
Beneath, with freight of garbage,

Oar and sail, the loot of many lives.

In the unsleeping night my thoughts
Are millet falling from an iron pan,
While you, my dear, in Delhi lying down
Enter the same room by another door.
The rupee god has trampled here;
The poor implore a Marxist cage.
Dragon seed, the huddled bundles lying
In doorways have perhaps one chilli,
A handful of ground maize.
King Famine rules. Tout and owl-eyed whore
Whose talons pluck and stain the sleeve,
Angels of judgement, husk the soul
Till pity, pity only stays.

*Out of my wounds they have made stars:
Each is an eye that looks on you.*

[Hocken MS704/19:71 CP194]

The Yoke

No lies, my dear, no lies,
Though kisses could patch quarrels once
When you were needle, I the thread;
A magic simple as poor Petronella's
Boarded by her lover on a vat
With private comfort, neither caring
How many devils slept inside.

Image of the soul: a granary
Moon-blind, inhabited by hungry rats;
Or those great fish that nudge
For rice grains on a sluggish pond
Whose freshet lies outside itself.
This knowledge left for the middle years
Cannot be evaded by a kiss.

So long ago, so long...
Your ikon nailed above the bed
In the attic of an unused life,
Will she put on her dressing gown, set free
The poet sighing in his cage of mirrors,
The sadhu, ignorant, smeared with ashes,
And freeing them, be also freed?

Only by the yoke, the perfect yoke
Unlearned, now learned again in writing.

[Hocken MS704/19:72 Unpublished]

The Carvers

Through villages of fish and oxen
Came to the silence of the daimon
By a steep path and dangerous,
Forgetting sweaty clothes and headache
In this town of boulders
Under the palmyra trees.

Look. The wasp had built her nest
Of brown daubed clay below the cornice.
Crabs clinging to the level blocks
With each new shoving wave.
They, the patient carvers
Whose massive music blossomed here
From hewn cloud and blown water,
Ignored the guide's grey chatter
And taught us what to be.

Dark Spirit, their Instructor,
For whom our sleepless hungers burn,
Shine in the casual labyrinth,
Explode the debris of our lives.
That *sadhu* not at all embarrassed
Among the mango-breasted *devas*,
His throne of waiting, is it ours—
Or the great midnight of Aquinas
Lighted by the rivers of the stars?

An urchin for two annas held the lantern
Where Vishnu in his square sea chamber
(Cradle and coffin of the soul)
Heard flutes of love in the sea's anger,
And long-tailed squirrels hid in grooves
Above the goat boy's pasture
When with my friends, Fernandez and Kannu,
Standing on the lion-pillared
Temple pyramid and burnt-out pharos
I nursed in exile the unkindled fire.

Dark Spirit of our disenthronement,
Punish and speak. Our deaths expect you.

[Hocken MS704/19:75 CP195]

Madras

Heaven's table shaken,
Crumbs tumbling from a greater feast
On this coast so like our own
Where aerial roots of banyan wave
Like curtains over rotting stone:
Unearthly tears, tears of peace
Probing the Apostle's hidden grave.

Torn by the exit of the demon
(Old desire for sleep in arms of stone)
In a cell at the Victoria
With coffee, oranges, a tepid shower,
I watched the delicate lizard climb
Spreadeagled on the plaster,
Depetalled the pure *naga-lingam*,
Flesh-red, flesh-gold, flesh-white,
That browns and wilts in half an hour.

Always You come without procession,
Dark Spirit sought and found,
Breeze, Tongue and Cloud,
For Whom my barefoot heart hiding
In the mountains of transgression
Thirsts and waits, O royal One,
More-than-Brahma, Light beyond the sun.

On the sea road from Madras You found me,
Led me to the doubting cave,
The *Sitio* of true belief,
Wounds not my own imprinted there,
Rain like arrows piercing the grass roofs
By the Apostle's mount and open grave.

[Hocken MS704/19:82 CP197]

Calcutta

On pavements, before dawn, small fires
Lighted in iron buckets,
Where carpenter and watchman slowly warm
With charcoal and wood shavings

Brown corded holy hands,
As if from veins of blood and gold
The city's life and exhalation.

Tears have flowed, how many tears
Lost and sprinkled on the iron floors,
Poverty crucified on destitution.
The noseless whore once married
To a green, beheaded coconut,
Tethered by ankle-rings of hammered silver,
A kind of human coat or flask;
The sweeper boy divided from his soul
All night in forests of blue bhang;
This voiceless, eyeless, aimless pain
Stained with betel juice and loops of dung,
Mouth and eyelid, black with flies,
Expects the mercy of the Deposition.

*I am the cup that holds your pain,
JANUA COELI, star of truth;
I am the ark, the stronghold of the King;
I am the void where Light is born.*

[Hocken MS704/19:83 Unpublished]

This Indian Morning

This Indian morning brown as Icarus
Flows guiltless to the vault of noon
Not influenced by cent per cent,
Obediences baggy at the seams,
Outside the Cretan labyrinth
Of money, conscience, work, glum dreams.

Now from the Muslim quarter rise
Dissolving cries and arabesques of fire
From braziers heated with dry cattle-dung.
Tomb-dwellers, women in black shawls,
With pots of dirty brass
Pad to the well, and chatter in the sun.

Eagles have bathed their wings at the ocean streams.
In a cold taxi coming from the mass
With Bertha in her blue silk dress
I think of money. Lepers in the gateway
Hold out their cups and bandaged palms.
Their eyes like desert cisterns burn.

Each soul a moonless oubliette
Waiting for the last great Key to turn.

[Hocken MS704/19:94 CP198]

Possibilities of Madness

Hashish would be one way – the touts retail it
In paper twists. It smells like medicine.
A whole night locked in the Calcutta room
You wrestled with the dead (a dead self stinking)
And from those dangerous jewelled gardens
Came out with a corpse's bitten tongue,
No *doppelganger's*, gripped in your own teeth.

Drink and sex, the old diseases,
Could mean no more than they have meant:
A steady pounding on the door of the tomb.
Yet in the crystal of a dark dream lately
You saw a locked stone tower (meaning life)
And on the top floor, open to the sky,
Two persons mummified and pierced with bullet holes.

Simply to grow old, meaning 'grow loveless',
Would be enough. No devil in the heart,
As any priest can tell you, may be cowed
By prohibiting: only yields
When the whole heart is broken like a [spoon?].
Madness of heartbreak drives all madness out.
My love, the devil lies; and we shall live like eagles.

We enter the abyss like Absalom
Hanging between the Yes and No of love.

Preoccupation with the Void has riddled
The green heart of a generation. Wake,
Somnambulists, my brothers, idle ones
Locked on the black and ivory squares;
Sisters who dream of empty haven
Under a nest of leaves. O wandering ones,
Grow fat, grow fat for the witch's oven.

My sensitives, my resurrection men,
Butcher the dying light. Like Absalom
You hang between the Yes and No of love.

[Hocken MS704/19:96 Unpublished]

Letter from India

Dear Earle – A letter from Nizamuddin,
My Indian residence, where like a nabob
I taste the Delhi sun – (a lion-skin,

This blessed terza rima does the job
For any man or mouse who roars inside.
Faulkner's hero used a ripe corncob

On Temple Drake, the raingod's virgin bride
And afterwards knelt whinnying by the bed;
So half a hundred headless poets ride

This tram to dereliction. Enough said.)
That our dear life is nasty, brutish, short,
Was said by Old Man Hobbes; and Hobbes is dead;

I hope he found some Christian kind of port.
India would have suited him quite well,
For like the banyan tree a Hindu's thought

Accepting all things human, even Hell,
Drops aerial roots in the abyss, alone –
If lepers rot, why, God has made them smell

For aimiable reasons of His own.
I need my Davy's lamp, my mug of tin,
To walk these tunnels of the living stone

(Hope is the lamp, the mug a sense of sin) –
If hearts are beggars, beggars often ask
For bread and air, yes, in Nizamuddin.

The smile that spreads on Shiva's golden mask
Is ignorant of pity. It approves
The dancing whore, a human coat or flask,

Dung in the streets, dead oxen, empty graves.
Ganesh, his child, the heavy rupee god,
Rules cowlike matrons in their tribal loves

And tramples on the poorest ironshod.
I grant you that the Hindu's counterpart
Exists wherever farmer crumbles clod,

At Southland wool sales, Auckland's cabbage mart;
But it is tempered by a little fear
That gold injections paralyse the heart.

From avarice to act the step is clear –
The flowers of a Mogul's hashish dream
Glitter on broken walls of tombs quite near

My own front gate, not far from the Jumna stream.
If poems sprang like Eve from Adam's rib
(Or bogey's to make bilious children scream)

I'd praise the fury of Sennacharib,
The glory of the lion in each bone
Cellared below. Oracular and glib

I'd paint the king upon his peacock throne
(It was torn down by looters) and, three feet
Under, his captives in their torture zone

That's mainly rubble now. In any street
King and prisoner sweat blood together,
For noonday demons do not mind the heat.

I write of devils now, who plucked the feather
And harp of ocean angels in my youth
Through the rough changes of Otago weather.

Devils and angels are the daylight truth
Of any man whose faith has found a Sun;
I pray to Michael, fear the devil's tooth.

When drugs have failed, and sex, the sawdust bun,
A poet has to learn to stand upright
And comprehend a world of bleeding stone.

O blessed desert, valley of clear sight,
Clairvaux, where Bernard pitched his goatskin tent
Finding in chasms of the soul's long night

Lions and thunders of the Sacrament!
I too by goatpaths to your silence come
Lit by no angel with a lantern sent

But that great Queen herself whose gentle name
Is bread and medicine and meat and wine.
Conversion stories, Earle, are all the same,

A sweet luxurious drug, a secret sign
Scratched on the stone for hoboes to spell out.

Zhivago dreamed all history divine

After Christ's birth, and in creative doubt
Wrote Magdalene's love song and burial song
(‘Your pain is mine’) through twenty years of drought.

I met a Chinese tailor in Hongkong
Who measured me for pants and told me how
King Mao took the people's measure wrong –

‘Too hard, too hard we work; eat better now
But have to talk all night about [new?] things;
Work, talk and sleep. Those bosses won't allow

‘The bird to build its nest or fold its wings’
(His hand shook) – ‘Boys forget a different way
Of life, and jump each time they pull the strings.’

We talked together for three hours that day;
That tailor touched me more than the business man
Caged in his lighted house above the bay,

Sifting the anthill with a Marxist fan,
An Oxford graduate, and hating all
Things English – ‘Where they ruled the rot began;

‘Mao has swept our house behind the Wall,
The Yellow River can run clear at last.’
His wife, a kindly lady in a shawl,

Loved dogs, admired reformers of the past –
George Fox and Lenin each had gifts to bring.
Pasternak? No; a mountebank, an outcast.

I thought of Cranmer and the fat sad king
Who plundered abbeys for a private reason,
Jingle of ice upon the holy spring

And *frigor Anglicanus* in its season.
Honour and England hid the blessed face
Of Her who never filed a writ of treason,

And they had brought me to this desert place
Defending what I loathed, the old school tie,
Against a just man of a foreign race.

How hawk and adder fight, and none ask why;
I trace it to the treason of the clerks
Who looked on morning with a loveless eye

And trusted books. To move your neighbour's landmarks
Was punishable once, but now is done
By preacher, killer, clown, while Cerberus barks.

The devil's choice, a penis or a gun
To shoot down Virtue at the jailhouse wall
Tickled our generation's sense of fun.

We died; live on because our hearts are small.
Some cut a little vein; some write a play;
And some will choose the toughest sop of all,

To fall and rise a hundred times a day.
'Our elders in the magic' (Durrell's words)
Would often write as if their hearts were gay

And so deceived us, whistling like cage birds
Though the cold devil had them on the hip;
We followed, left the fire, the bowl of winds,

And marched hungry in the desert's grip.

[Hocken MS704/19:101 Unpublished]

Night in Delhi

The moon's vast geometric nimbus
Includes the town, the tombs, the heavy eaves
As cold as Rome and twice as foreign.
At night the cages of the past open,
Love shakes the safe dwelling.
Bar the thin door to keep out thieves.

I want simplicity and lightness
To break these daily fetters and
Thoughts that move like Delhi oxen
Gaunt-ribbed, with gold-painted horns,
Hauling the load of endless noon.
The empire of a poem gladly
Would hide beneath your hand.

We broach the midnight of the Kama Sutra
(Mare's hold, spear-thrust, split-bamboo,
Crab and blossoming lotus)
Nudging from the earth of many wishes
While under flowered quilts the children sleep.
Unbind your dark hair. Seas of the heart

Drawn by the nearness of the moon
Into prodigious waterspouts. These
Were our familiar proud catastrophes
That spilt upon the rock a rain of fishes.

I saw where in a wilderness did lie
The royal spirits of our burdened age.
Some slept; some roared, and shook the walls in rage;
Crowned beasts in cages open to the sky.
The lucky ones are mated. O my queen,
Here is your mortal canopy and throne.
We are two eagles in an equal gyre
Rising above the wilds of sense
In the sun's eye and freedom of his grove.
Such love seems to the world indifference.

[Hocken MS704/19:104 CP198]

Elephanta

Accordion and sweet brisk drum
Waken a lounging passion

Outside the wooden teashop where a young
Black-trousered androgynous dancer

Trounces the dust, crooking a maggot's finger,
While pockmarked queers applaud and smoke.

Great hawks like monoplanes
Above the bony tamarind,

Above the quarried rock sail high, high,
And Shiva like a business uncle watches

The village girls with cans to fill
File through the temple to a covered cistern.

Consider. Seasnake, white cloud minnow,
Octopus and moray eel,

Lovely in their lit aquariums
Breathe water as we do,

Have the advantage that they cannot feel.
Yet I have seen, across an angry tide-rip,

The narrow coffin-boat, the catamaran,
Go simply as a girl, with forward-leaning

Mast and torn triangular sail,
Leaving a crowded net behind.

[Hocken MS704/20:6 CP201]

Goodbye to India

I cannot fetch from the pool
The image that glitters there
Between hoof-trodden mud
And the hawk-thronged air.
O hearts of diamond
Remember me in prayer.

Steel of a hand-made gun,
Whine of a wooden flute,
A friend's hand at an elbow
In the honking street,
At noon in an open field
Taste of the poor man's meat.

Wheat rustles like the sea.
I have no word to tell
How peace can load the heart
At the moment of night
When women go from the cistern
And all their pots are full.

Flood waters drown tomorrow
Burrow of make and [sent?].
Our blind technology
Beats at a locked gate.
In the whirl of the potter's hand
India sleeps apart.

Like spit on a drying stone
My blessing is unsaid.
O hearts of diamond,
Children of Gunga's pride
You who gave me shelter
Accept the unsaid word.

[Hocken MS704/20:19 Unpublished]

Return to Exile

Returning on shipboard from an older land,
Amoeba in his bowels, one travelling man
Sees with gratitude the home coast rise,
Lares et penates...

No trumpet on the mountain. From
Exile into exile he goes home.
Secretly the glittering coast instructs him:
'Your lot is now intelligible pain.
Ignore the whorish voice that whispers
Of meekness, meekness among thieves.
I am your angel. Rage against me.
Older, so very little wiser,
Set down your meaning with a shaking hand.'

[Hocken MS704/20:24 Unpublished]