

YASHWANT MANOHAR

An Ultimatum

See this row of sunsets in the cracks of my eyes
Tell me how to live if at each moment one dies,
In this decisive darkness I seek for words, brother
like one enclosed in a forest of flames forever I smother
And what if I raise a piteous cry
in this well-appointed cemetery — ? *eating his own kind!*

Or rage against this settlement
of leafless cannibal trees

On these accursed lips summer fires arise, brother
set aflame by stormy winds — *Hardships*

And each vein is alight with lamps of deadly venom *bitterness for others*

Tell me what seas would cool this burn

Or tell me how to live as I die at each moment's turn.

The day attacks, a terrorist in the land of my brain

And nights never cease, the soul is aflame

Serried ranks of bone confront me at every step;

They surround me, laughing hideously,

throughout my generations.

Tell me what place of rest this barred breast can earn

Or tell me how to live as I die at each moment's turn.

The sky here owns not a spot

that would afford a shade.

to my beheaded breaths — *dead moments*

The roads look strange, brother,

and so is the air

The rains do not let me

break into a moonlight clear

What kinships should I dwell on for a moment

as I draw a covering of ocean over me

ties with the oppressors

*protection like that of
cemetery*

no kinship
 I feel a foreigner among the people
 Bearing the burden of such a bastard life
Steaming lava has dashed against my lips
 O tell me what answer I should return
 Or tell me how to live as I die at each moment's turn.

sums up the whole gamut of experience!

Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat

*Volcano ready to erupt!
 as an answer to the cannibal trees*

① Not living but dying

② Helplessness → 'enclosed flames'
 inner rage but such
 deadly constraints on expression
 protest, retaliation

DAYA PAWAR
Blood-wave

My ear pressed to your side
heavy with child,
I hear rumours of the ocean.
The waves of blood swelling out
from a body fulfilled.
The mine nudging the seaweed is
eager for its first glimpse
of the universe.
Fists tight ... clenched for a blow,
the life small as a fist
is aflame with ardour.
But you are so desolate ... why desolation?
Do you fear —
As our generations gave lifelong battle
battered by wind and rain
Our birthing bed arrayed
under a palm-leaf thatch
Feasting off gruel
boiled rolling on our cooking fires
Do you fear,
As our generations grown bull-strong, bull-humped
pulling the village like a cart,
became lifeless lumps worth mud,
he too will be mud?
Truly, if he is to be
thus crushed and lifeless
Then — remember the Greek myth? —
As soon as the cord is cut
let's burn, scorch, fire-harden him
in leaping flames. This phoenix
feeding on live coals
will brave the powerful skies

Dalit Poetry

and all that this nation never offered
to you or me — the joy, the glory —
he will pull down to his feet.

Translated by Priya Adarkar

L. S. ROKADE

To be or Not to be Born

Mother, you used to tell me
when I was born
your labour was very long.
The reason, mother,
the reason for your long labour:
I, still in your womb, was wondering
Do I want to be born —
Do I want to be born at all
in this land?
Where all paths raced horizonwards
but to me were barred
All of you lay, eyes fixed on the sky
then shut them, saying
calmly, yes,
the sky has a prop, a prop!
Your body covered
with generations of dire poverty
Your head pillowed
on constant need
You slept at night
and in the day you writhed
with empty fists tied to your breast!
Here you are not supposed to say
that every human being comes
from the union of man and woman
Here, nobody dare
broaden the beaten track.
You ran round and round yourself
exclaiming YES, of course
the earth is round, is round.
Mother, this is your land
flowing with water

Rivers break their banks
Lakes brim over
And you, one of the human race
must shed blood
struggle and strike
for a palmful of water.
I spit on this great civilization
Is this land yours, mother,
because you were born here?
Is it mine
because I was born to you?
Must I call this great land mine
love it
sing its glory?
Sorry, mother, but truth to tell
I must confess I wondered
Should I be born
Should I be born into this land?

Translated by Shanta Gokhale

PRAKASH KHARAT

The Sky with its Eyes Closed

Like an artist missing originality
the sky has lost its vision.
Eyes closed
it wouldn't acknowledge
a light blue complexion,
the sudden rainbow
or a stray eagle,
the rising
and setting of the sun.

The sky does not burst into torrential monsoon rains.
The sky does not give birth to a flaming thunderbolt.
The sky cannot support its own expansion.
The sky — who has put it in the coffin?
The sky — who wrapped it in the shroud of white clouds?

Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat