

Classic Poetry Series

Keki Daruwalla
- poems -

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Keki Daruwalla(1937 -)

Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla was born in 1937 in Lahore in undivided India. In 1945 his father Prof. N.C. Daruwalla retired from Govt. College Lyallpur (now Shah Faizlabad) and moved to Junagadh as Tutor and Guardian to the Prince. His latest novel *Ancestral Affairs* (Harpercollins, 2015) dwells on Junagadh's disastrous accession to Pakistan in 1947. From Junagadh the family moved to Rampur in UP in 1948, where he first studied in Baqar School and later Raza Inter college. His early education, mostly in sub –standard institutions, was pretty chaotic, especially because the language of instruction kept changing, the last two being Urdu and then Hindi. From 1952 -58 he studied in Government College Ludhiana. He attended a coaching camp run by Lala Amarnath and captained his College Cricket XI.

He picked up his love for English literature and cricket from his father. Daruwalla joined the Indian Police Service (IPS) in 1958. He had two stints in anti dacoity operations in UP and also served in the SSB on the Indi Tibet border for three years 1963-66, where he trekked up to heights of 18,880 feet while crossing the Chorhoti Pass. He joined the Cabinet Secretariat and left R&AW as Special Secretary when he was promoted as Secretary and Chairman JIC (Joint Intelligence Committee) in 1993. He retired in 1995.

After retirement he rode through the entire Himalayas (including Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim) in 2003. He served as Member National Commission for Minorities (2011-2014) where he visited and enquired into practically every major communal riot. He was awarded the Padma Shri for his writing in 2014. He returned his Sahitya Academy Award in 2015 as a protest against its reluctance to take up the cause of rationalist writers murdered by right wing diehards, and also against intolerance of fringe elements belonging to so called 'cultural' factions.

He was Special Assistant to the Prime Minister in 1979.

Daruwalla was a Colombo Plan scholar at Oxford 1980-81 where he worked on Politics in South Asia. He was also a member of the Commonwealth Observers Group for the Zimbabwe Elections in 1980.

A Take-Off On A Passing Remark

Tall buildings impress me
the ones which cut off half the sky.
I like tall stories, even though false;
not the half-truth sleeping with the half-lie.
I want things on a large scale:
amplitudes, a sense of space and light,
the great yellow eye of the train
lighting up the distances of the night.
Urchins, furred caterpillars, moles
and fern-beds are all right.
But I want flowering trees, long
streamers of moss, flaming parasites.
But when you ask, still squirrel-young
short as twilight
short as a shadow at noon
why I love you, what can I answer?

[From 'The Glass-Blower: Selected Poems']

Keki Daruwalla

Al-Azhar Lecture

They are naïve, those who suggest
that the fortunes of the ruler
and the ruled go hand in hand.
Take the plague of 1350,
which traveled like a caravan
from China across the Pamirs
to the caravanserai called Egypt;
rested here, refilled its water-skins
and moved on to Europe.
Twenty thousand died each day in Cairo,
Mamluk, Emir and fellahin.
But while the people sprouted buboes
and the cattle broke out in blains
and the Nile was scaled with
dead shoals of silver-bellied fish,
the Sultan got richer.
When everyone dies
who succeeds to property
but the Sultan who embodies the state?
Jazziya was another money spinner
And the plague must have spared
The non-Muslim - it often does.
Can we blame the State Treasurer
If, as he prayed, he asked Allah
for more plagues and more unbelievers?

[From: The Map-maker]

Keki Daruwalla

Alexander Crosses The Hellespont

He was a little tentative
when it came to the East.
Its ways were quite insidious
and odd to say the least.

His experience was unhappy:
His first stop had been Cairo
where he had gone to drop his card
and call on the Pharaoh.

They laid a banquet for him
At the Casino Mariot
and placed by Pope Shenodah
who but Judas Iscariot!

The Turks would be more organized
he fondly hoped - and damn!
He couldn't cross the Hellespont.
There was a traffic jam.

He raged and ranted fiercely
"I must have been a fool
to try and venture into
intestinal Istanbul.

When do we get to Asia?"
Great Alexander probed.
"When Effendi comes to Turkia
He comes from Europe to Europe.

You can check with CNN
Or ask the BBC.
When you come to Turkey
You come to EEC."

He remembered Aristotle:
"Son, at the Turkish Rail
ask for the Occident Express
The Occidental Mail."

As he checked into a hotel
- the Turks call it Oteli -
he found Thais lodged in Hilton
while he was in Surmeli.

What really turned his eyes into
two glowing bits of phosphorous
was that his friend Hephaestion
checked into Hotel Bosphorous.

His face turned dark and sullen
as a cloud's before a storm.
And though they humoured him he screamed
"I want Hephaestion!";

They offered handsome eunuchs,
whores from the Golden Horn.
But Alexander kept on saying
"I want Hephaestion";.

Thias phoned "I am bored at Hilton,
And I am quite akeli.";
But he said what can I do
for I am at Surmeli!";

And Mehmet Ali Pasha,
a little high on raaki
asked poor Alexander
if he was an Iraqi?

Then in the hotel dining room
dressed in salwar-kameez,
a man accosted him and said
"could I have your good name please?

Arrey Janab Sikandar Sahab!
Myself Assad Durrani.
Oh what a treat it is to meet
a fellow Pakistani.";

Alexander answered darkly

"Thanks very much Janab.
Tell Porus inshah Allah
We'll be meeting in Punjab."

He drove the Persians backwards
right up to Tarbela.
He beat them up at Granicus.
He thrashed them at Arbela.

While he uncorkd the champagne
and lit the fireworks,
who should speak but Spoil Sport
Parmenio, the jerk.
"Sire, though you thrashed the Persians,
you never touched a Turk."

Keki Daruwalla

Bars

If you want
a cage, my dear
you do not have
to travel far.
If you want to feel
hemmed in, you'll be hemmed in.
Look for scars
you'll be full of scars.
Even light can turn
into a cage.
The cage of light
has seven bars.

[From: The Map-maker]

Keki Daruwalla

Before The Word

Corn is great, on the cob or otherwise,
but before corn in the ear there was life.
Fire is holy especially for Zoroastrians,
but before fire too there was life.
Before the bowstring and the flint arrow sang,
there was life.

The word is great,
yet there was life before the word.
We can't turn romantic and say
we were into bird speech or river-roar then,
into the silence of frost
or the language of rain.
But forest speech and swamp speech
came through easier to us.
When lightning crashed,
the cry of the marsh bird was our cry,
and we flung ourselves to the other branch
like any other baboon.

As winter whined on windy cliff,
we shivered with the yellow grass.
In winter-dark a hundred eyes
flared yellow in the jungle scrub.
When seasons changed, blood coursed with sap
and flowered in meadows. We were at home.
Nor eyes nor bat cries bothered us.
What if we didn't know
a bat assessed reality
from the ricochet of its cry?

Though there were no words,
fear had a voice with many echoes.
Worship was quieter, adoration
spoke only through the eyes or knees.

What was it like before language dropped like dew,
covering the scuffed grass of our lives?

Keki Daruwalla

Fish

The sea came in with her and her curved snout
and her tin coloured barnacles
and long threaded rose moles
patterned on her body.

The sea brought her and her curved snout
and her rose moles and her eyes still translucent
as if half aware and half unaware
of the state of her body.

The sea came in with her and her scimitar snout
and her translucent eyes
greying into stone.

The sea brought her in,
wrapped in seaweed
and slapped her on the sand,
all five feet of her
with the armour of her scales
and the filigree of her rose moles.

The tide kept coming in
but couldn't disturb her
or her resting place -
she was heavy.

The sea fell back but even
as the thin-edged foam line receded,
it went to her once more with a supreme effort,
rummaged among her barnacles
and left.

Keki Daruwalla

Map-Maker

Perhaps I'll wake up on some alien shore
In the shimmer of an aluminium dawn,
to find the sea talking to itself
and rummaging among the lines I've drawn;
looking for something, a voyager perhaps,
gnarled as a thorn tree in whose loving hands,
these map lines of mine, somnambulant,
will wake and pulse and turn to shoreline, sand.

The spyglass will alight on features I've forecast -
cape, promontory - he'll feel he's been here,
that voyaging unlocks the doorways of the past.

And deep in the night, in the clarity of dream,
The seafarer will garner his rewards,
raking in his islands like pebbles from a stream.

2

Does the world need maps, where sign and symbol,
standing as proxies, get worked into scrolls?
You see them, mountain chains with rain gods in their armpits
and glaciers locked like glass-slivers in their folds.
Desert, scrub, pasture - do they need shading?
They're all there for the eye to apprehend.
A family of cactus and camelthorn tells you
where one begins and the other ends.

These questions confound me, I'd rather paint
for a while - a ship on the skyline,
or cloud-shadow moving like a spreading stain.
Yet they live, pencil strokes that speak for rain
and thunder; and die - maplines ghosting round
a cycloned island that has gone under.

3

Forget markings, forget landfall and sea.
Go easy Man, I tell myself; breathe.
Gulls will mark the estuary for you,
bubbles will indicate where the swamps seethe.
Map the wrinkles on the ageing skin of love.
Forget Eastings, Northings - they stand for order.
Cry, if you must, over that locust line
flayed open into a barbarized border.

Mark a poem that hasn't broken forth, map the undefined,
the swamp within, the hedge between love and hate.
Forget the coastal casuarinas line.

Reefs one can handle. It's lust that seeks
out its quarry that one cannot map, nor that
heaving salt of desire that floods the creeks.

4

If you map the future, while a millennium
moves on its hinges, you may find
the present turned into an anachronism.
This too is important - what is yours and mine,
The silk of these shared moments. But having stuck
to love and poetry, heeding the voice of reason;
and experiencing the different textures of
a season of love and love's eternal season,

I put a clamp on yearning, shun latitudes, renounce form.
And turn my eye to the far kingdom
of bloodless Kalinga battling with a storm.
Dampen your fires, turn from lighthouse, spire, steeple.
Forget maps and voyaging, study instead
the parched earth horoscope of a brown people.

[From: The Map-maker]

Keki Daruwalla

Migrations

Migrations are always difficult:
ask any drought,
any plague;
ask the year 1947.
Ask the chronicles themselves:
if there had been no migrations
would there have been enough
history to munch on?

Going back in time is also tough.
Ask anyone back-trekking to Sargodha
or Jhelum or Mianwali and they'll tell you.
New faces among old brick;
politeness, sentiment,
dripping from the lips of strangers.
This is still your house, Sir.

And if you meditate on time
that is no longer time -
(the past is frozen, it is stone,
that which doesn't move
and pulsate is not time) -
if you meditate on that scrap of time,
the mood turns pensive
like the monsoons
gathering in the skies
but not breaking.

Mother used to ask, don't you remember my mother?
You'd be in the kitchen all the time
and run with the fries she ladled out,
still sizzling on the plate.
Don't you remember her at all?
Mother's fallen face
would fall further
at my impassivity.
Now my dreams ask me
If I remember my mother
And I am not sure how I'll handle that.

Migrating across years is also difficult.

[From: The Map-maker]

Keki Daruwalla

Notes From The Underground

The wind is cold and the wind burns.
The wind is cold and the wind is acid.
On the Bar counter ice and amber swirl
in thick gleaming glasses;
in the Bar the ash of small talk,
the smoke of ruminations.
Light purrs on a bare shoulder,
her feet are hidden
in the drooping hem of her sari;
ice and amber swirling
I sit here between between,
to the left of voices
to the right of memory.
Thought floats into
the slow silence of air currents;
the hours squat with me
as I snap connections
in autumn leaf detachment.

2

Nowhere to say this
no one to say this to
except to the typewriter
(the computer would store it
in its chip-memory
and that could be embarrassing)
as she pulled out
he turned into a dead crab beach
when the sea pulls out

3

Were the sea to pull out
sea birds would pull out
and the breeze;
shells would turn brittle
under crackling boot;
fish and fishermen

would be sucked into the great ebb
and our traders
would turn the white sea bed
into 'The Salt Crystal
Shopping Arcade',
selling grounded oil tankers,
ocean liners dredged out of the mud
and whales flaked in salt.
You could buy goldfish though
as they circle the belly of a water jar.

4

You didn't come with me
to the mountains this time,
but as you know
when you climb mountains
the stars get nearer;
don't ask me why this happens
or how this happens
but it happens -
when constellations smile
death drops your catch.
but often the stars
go about their office routine
in the night sky
like glum bureaucrats -
this astral bureaucracy
is even more baffling in its ways
than our central ministries.
In auto mode Rahu gets into the act;
So does the moon debris that swirls
around Saturn and forms its rings.
Then what has to happen, happens.
That's what happened to you.

5

The almond tree flowers white;
beside it the peach flowers, as only peach can
with its own interpretation of pink;
and further in the lofty rear,

winter has left its brown imprint
on mountain and crag.
Perhaps with the rains
green may return to the slopes,
a little moss here, a little grass there;
you never know though,
the rains may never come
or life may run out before the rains -
the almond blossom, each petal soft as an eyelid,
will also not see the rain.
They are divided by a scimitar:
parched landscapes and rain,
parched lips and love.

6

Watching the wind-ruffled
down on bird-breast
I think for no particular reason
of wind through quivering paddy
in the Nepal terai.

7

I think I am at peace now,
he said, for my dreams
move like the thinnest
veil of mist over water.
Awareness of absences,
of what is right with me
or wrong with me is also like
the perception of a veil of mist
over a perception of water.

My troubles start
when I think of hope,
that thin smoke of mist
over the iron-grey waters of dawn,
icy waters, he said.

But you are with me always
like a spring of

underground water
like the murmur of a spring
of underground water.

I didn't for the life of me know
whether he was addressing poetry
(he had lost his touch lately)
or his beloved.

Forty years with you
and I am a better man,
he said, awash
in forty years of cleansing waters
and forty years of light.
The trouble was
She couldn't hear him.

Keki Daruwalla

Sappho To Aphrodite

Long and lonely are my nights.
Come help me Goddess, end my blight;
her absence burns me, burns my sides
with love intense.

Aphrodite, hail or sleet,
I implore you to come down from Crete;
my altar smokes, awaits your feet,
with frankincense.

Your love-demented Sappho pleads:
Give me no manna and no mead.
It's love, not wine that Sappho needs
you understand.

I haven't had a word from her!
Once again make her my lover
in bed and bower her breasts should flower,
in my hands.

Her star-erasing beauty's spell,
turns me feverish, frail, unwell.
Her presence is both bliss and hell -
I tremble so.

Her absence scars my empty flank.
Goddess you don't need my verse
to tell you this. My love is frank,
I can't dissemble so.

Bring back Gongyla to my side!
May she once more become my bride!
May she, her lyre and her fire
beside me purr.

Come foam-born and Cyprus-born,
Goddess of love and the lovelorn,
my altar awaits you with fire-urn,
incense and myrrh.

Keki Daruwalla

Suddenly The Tree

The hive slept like Argus
its thousand eyes covered with bees.
The light as it fell through the neem tree
was a marine light, in which
yellow moths set sail
from one perforated shadow to another.
The hive was mystic,
a drugged mantra
with its dark syllables asleep.
As the afternoon wore on
the honey-thieves came
and smoked the bees out
and carved out a honey-laden
crescent for themselves
and left a lump of pocked wax behind.
The bees roamed the house,
too bewildered to sting the children.
At night they slept, clinging
to the tree fork, now scarred with burns.
Sparrows and squirrels, a bird
with a black crest and a red half-moon
for an eyelid bickered over
the waxed remains the next day.
Then with a drone of straining engines
the bees rose like a swarm of passions
from a dying heart, and left.

[From 'The Glass-Blower: Selected Poems']

Keki Daruwalla

The Poseidonians

(After Cavafy)

[We behave like] the Poseidonians in the Tyrrhenian Gulf, who although of Greek origin, became barbarized as Tyrrhenians or Romans and changed their speech and the customs of their ancestors. But they observe one Greek festival even to this day; during this they gather together and call up from memory their ancient names and customs, and then lamenting loudly to each other and weeping, they go away.

Athenios, Deipnosophistai, Book 14, 31A [632]

All it takes to blight a language
is another sun. It's not burn
that does it, or chill, or the way
woods straggle down the hills, or seas
curl along the shingled coast.
It is the women, cowering
in fear, whom the soldiers,
as they clamber down the boats,
first reassure and then marry.

They are faithful, good with grain,
at baking bread and fermenting wine
and unscrambling the fish shoals from the meshes.
They get the goddesses wrong sometimes [but so what?]
Confusing mother with daughter.
And there are minor errors
In ritual and sacrifice,
In lustration oils and libations.

A few seasons teach the man
that his woman's omen birds are always right;
her fears travel down the bloodstream
and a new language emerges from the placenta.

What does one do with a thought
that embarks on one script and lands on another?
A hundred years go by, perhaps two hundred,
Living with the Tyrrhenians and the Etruscans,
and they discover there is more to language
than merely words, that every act
from making wine to making love
filters through a different prism of sound,
and they have forgotten the land they set sail from
and the syllables that seeded that land.

What do they do, except once a year
At a lyre-and-lute festival,
Greek to the core, with dance and contests,
groping for memories in the blood,
like Demeter, torch in hand,
looking for her netherworld daughter?
And weep a little for the Greece they have lost
and reflect on the gulf of years which has proved
wider than the Tyrrhenian gulf,
and the hiatus between languages,
wider than the Aegean ?
What can they do, but weep for Agora
and Acropolis, forever left behind;
and reflect, how three centuries distant
from the Ionian coast,
they have been barbarized by Rome?

[From: A Summer of Tigers]

Keki Daruwalla

Underwater Notes

(On revisiting a dream)

I am alone in the house.

It is warm

but I feel cold.

The doors swing open across the years.

For someone who has no ancestral home,

who doesn't have

the long shadow of the past

to ruffle his hair,

homecoming gets distorted.

Time squints, space wobbles

and the visit, encoded as it is,

remains undeciphered.

2

It is cold,

the windows are frost-smudged.

Counsel yourself, there's no one

else to do it.

Let hieroglyphs

remain dented where they are.

Let wind erode them, or time -

they are warp and weft of all erosion.

Come out of the house and write

(not hieroglyphs this time!)

It is cold.

Frost has smudged the windows.

Your hair is grey as hoarfrost.

3

A rundown house,

is a desolation.

A rundown house

perched on a live memory,

with me alone conversing with both
is a double desolation.
Twenty years ago when I took a look around
It wasn't there.
Someone now tells me at a reunion
the house is standing,
only new streets
interlock around it.
It's still there! That's nice,
one desolation gets sloughed off
.

4

It's only when reality slips by
like a sliding panel
that you realize
that the marvellous in the everyday real
has passed you by.

5

Seated on the hull of your boat
you lurch and tilt.
The horizon is the forest,
darkening leaf on darkening sky.

Slot your time properly
in the right caves.
The sea is the present
The forest is the future.

Speech is present tense
Echo is the future.

If you are talking of echoes
you are talking of walls.
If you talk of water echo
you are discussing womb walls -
odd territory,

come out of it.
Unsure on land
 you take to the sea.
The skyline is a forest
Fern-dark, shadow-dark
graveled with white coral grit.

6

Whatever evil he suffered, he forgot
said Milosz in one of his poems.
Now that's a scrap of myth, isn't it?
And it is one thing to forgive
and another to forget.
I tried to put things behind me,
in the backyards of memory-clutter,
and went back to my flirtations with altitudes,
touched the Karakorams at Siachen,
touched - Hindi has such a lovely word for it, 'sparsh' -
Nubra, the garden of the North
and slept in a tent at Tsomoriri -
the rocks brown, the lake blue;
I got hold of a scrap of a myth here
(at 15000 feet it's a good scrap to grab).
It was very hot, and a woman called Tsomo
riding a yak couldn't rein him in,
as the yak made straight for the lake.
She kept shouting 'riri, riri', 'stop, stop' in Tibetan,
but the yak went in and they both drowned.

7

The stars have flung
their net into the sea
Among the thrashing fish shoal
and the lassoed crab
look for me.

Keki Daruwalla

Wolf

Fire-lit
half silhouette and half myth
the wolf circles my past
treading the leaves into a bed
till he sleeps, black snout
on extended paws.
Black snout on sulphur body
he nudged his way
into my consciousness.
Prowler, wind-sniffer, throat-catcher,
his cries drew a ring
around my night;
a child's night is a village
on the forest edge.
My mother said
his ears stand up
at the fall of dew
he can sense a shadow
move across a hedge
on a dark night;
he can sniff out
your approaching dreams;
there is nothing
that won't be lit up
by the dark torch of his eyes.
The wolves have been slaughtered now.
A hedge of smoking gun-barrels
rings my daughter's dreams.

[From 'The Glass-Blower: Selected Poems']

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