

OF
INDIAN
ORIGIN
Writings from Australia

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Edited by

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Meeta Chatterjee Padmanabhan



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OF INDIAN ORIGIN: WRITINGS FROM AUSTRALIA

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Paining over dimensions and objective correlatives for my emotions,

I have recoiled from shining loads of blankness.

But sometimes the right words just flutter in and sit on the page like uninvited birds.

Feeding on my mirths and hurts, they dance:

their footwork perfect, their mudras fitting.

And then suddenly cocking their heads to one side,

They beat their wings.

A poem takes shape and flies.

SUDESH MISHRA

Now Professor in English at the University of the South Pacific in his birthplace, Fiji, Mishra was born in 1962 and completed his Honours BA and then a doctorate in Australia. He has taught in both Scotland and, for many years, in Australia, and his poetry has been published internationally. His collections are *Rahu* (1987), *Tandava* (1992), *Memoirs of a Reluctant Traveller* (1994) and *Diaspora and the Difficult Art of Dying* (2002). Two of his plays were included in *Beyond Ceremony: An Anthology of Drama from Fiji* (1992).

Mishra's poems often carry echoes of Yeats and Eliot. 'Mt. Abu: St. Xavier's Church' is selected from *Memoirs of a Reluctant Traveller*, published by CRNLE/Wakefield Press. 'Feejee III', 'Dear Syd', 'Self-Reflection' and 'Indian-Australian Association: Annual General Meeting' appeared in *Tandava*, published by Meanjin Press. Note, in Fijian words, *d* is sounded as *nd* and *b* as *mb*.

Mt Abu: St Xavier's Church

There is an Anglican Church at Bazaar
 With broken stained-glass windows and a belfry
 That will crumble in less than two or three
 Years, if the raja or the ruling sarkaar
 Continues to tread the path of negligence.
 Should I be indifferent after the fact,
 Being one with many axes to grind? What
 Perverted sense, what religious romance
 Gave rise to this house—while in Calcutta
 They sold you, Father, across the water?¹

¹ This refers to the forceful indenture of poverty-stricken Indians to labour on Fijian sugar plantations.

Feejee III

To renew my own decay I return annually
 From the exiled pages of Vidhya Napaul,
 Re-acquaint myself with residual friendships
 And the debris of relations who gather my success
 In the vacant shell of a tactless crustacean,
 and through me toast themselves.

After all, they say, you resemble mother's father's
 Pedagogic brother. I empty a vitamin pill
 And shut myself in the capsule, hoping desperately
 To transmute into someone blissfully average,
 Like that cousin who botched basic school,
 But knew success with a much-neglected girlfriend.
 Before envy's gelignite disrupts your shell

(For she's with child by him in marriage,
 So you heard from a casual friend, who made a point
 Of mentioning the fact casually),

You shed all pretensions and ride out the anger
 At the local bordello. Only the post-coital cigarette
 Tells just how fictional are the experiences
 Of Stephen Daedalus. In six weeks your liver
 Is as susceptible to flame as Badlu's gas station;

And the surviving neurones confirm
 The journey back to a land you'll never call home.
 And so the snake devours its tail
 And so the third-eye on itself prevails.

Dear Syd²

I live behind the chequered grilles in Nasese,
 Where all the trash cans are pink and joggers
 Pullulate like geckos on the kerb,
 And the kerb becomes a luminous stage

² After returning to teach in Suva, the capital of Fiji, Mishra wrote to the poet and his former PhD supervisor, Syd Harrex.

For the act of chasing papery moths
 Till someone turns the lights off. For two weeks
 I have dwelt in a subliminal dark,
 Groping at the faucet, trying to turn on
 A childhood in the phalanxed sugarfields
 Of Nadi. After ten homecomings I find
 I'm indigenous to the sky; while the sea,
 That hirsute swashbuckler, breaks crockery
 All over the reef. O to lunch al fresco
 With naiads mad on strawberries as breakers
 Strap the obstinate earth. O to be cast
 Adrift on a barrel of the darkest Hermitage,³
 A seraphic gull blithely oblivious
 To destination and destiny. My wishes
 Are romantic, to say the least, but what
 Visions to prize, old friend, from an island
 Where tyrants, like washerwomen, follow
 The logic of the clothesline: where each new day
 A moustachioed bandit⁴ poses as sheriff?
 Thus I give myself to the arched suavity
 Of the conch, or, hermetically sealed
 In my sweltering chalet, listen to Bach
 And Pankaj Udhass.

The morning rain thins
 To the beat of a typewriter; I dream
 Of the hatchet-scene in Dostoyevsky
 And am stricken with guilt. What to boast of
 Having killed the dissident in my soul?
 What to boast of after such confessions?
 The resident poet's a castaway, they'll say;
 And I will be silent, having grown wise
 In my ostrich view of things. But the rage
 (That gets others lancing at the abscess
 In their mongrel's foot) is inside me too;

³ A costly red wine from South Australia.

⁴ The 'bandit' refers to Sitiveni Rabuka, a military officer who led the first coup in Fiji in 1987. He was later elected the Prime Minister of Fiji.

And in nightmares the cries from the broken Syria⁵
 Break me like no book—the splintering hull,
 The seething ocean, the human struggle;
 Afterwards the wash of the sea and a silence.
 These images won't let me be, macheteing
 Through my equanimity, sinking the coracle
 Bobbing inside the archipelagic heart.
 So, a hoon⁶ in a black Holden,⁷ I fly west
 Over humps and potholes, through villages
 And resorts where veritable Fridays
 Hobnob with veritable Crusoes. The smell
 Of burning cane obsesses me to the point
 Of distraction; twenty miles from Nadi
 I stop to watch sooty flakes of cane fall
 Upon the dome of a sky gored by bulls.
 Twenty miles from home I break with grief,
 And all the rhymes go sour like toads
 Bespattered on the road.

Only a grandfather,
 Leaning on his malacca cane, could explain
 Why such sights move the bourgeois soul; only
 A grandmother cracking clothes over river-stones
 Could say why I stopped along a dark highway
 To watch the communion of ash and sky
 In a silence that was as consummate
 As the sound of crying in an empty church.

⁵ The Syria was a ship which carried indentured labourers to Fiji. In 1884, it was shipwrecked off the coast of Viti Levu and 59 people lost their lives.

⁶ An unruly young man, generally linked with reckless diving.

⁷ The Holden is Australia's national car.

Self-Reflection

A stiff wind fills up the neighbour's laundry.
 What philosophy to wring from this, or
 From a scalloped ocean that will forever cry
 And tumble question marks along the shore?
 Poets always fuss about something: a bride's
 Haughty upper lip or unclean slogans
 On toilet seats. If anything survives,
 After the holocaust dirties our linen,
 Poets will, and cockroaches, and the Reagans.
 We bards live in a rarefied heaven
 Where verse grows in drawers with rats' droppings,
 And nothing disrupts the beady-eyed facts
 Of our nocturnal comings and goings;
 Nothing that touches you touches our little truths.

Indian-Australian Association: Annual General Meeting

Minutes

South says North's smeared with turd;
 North says South is turd;
 West, lachrymose with fervour,
 Will brook no schism on the grounds
 Of regionalism. East asks
 Whether he'd brook schism on the turf
 Of turdism. The Sikhs,
 Through sheer force of habit, opt out—
 Improve a room, a gathering
 In etheral Khalistan. Meanwhile
 The Fijians sit tight and contemplate
 The wine, the women, the guffawing clock.