

On Living Poems

Many people will tell you that no one makes a living by poetry. And, yet, one should add, we *live* by poetry.

Dancing to Death, a hauntingly beautiful collection of recently published poems by Gopilal Acharya, an accomplished Bhutanese editor and writer, is a verse-memoir of love, death, and perhaps, the death of love.

There are 49 poems in the 70 pages of the book, which has as its cover, paintings by the acclaimed Bhutanese artist Kama Wangdi.

If you have ever listened to Leonard Cohen or Tom Waits or Bob Dylan, if you have ever read Murakami's fiction, if you have watched movies by French auteurs or Bergman or Wong Kar-Wai, if you have delighted in the verses of Blake, Whitman, Yeats, Rimbaud, Celan, Carver, Rich, or The Beats -- you will cherish these poems.

The poet is a lone existential nihilist 'I' struggling against the surrounding universe which is, at once, both dreary and full of desire. He is in love with loves that will not let him be ('even as I slave / to be a willing lover to an unwilling woman' in *Desertion* or 'Come back, she surely will / Come back to me, she never would' in *The Departure*). He cannot help but be torn between a resignation and a renewal; between his feelings for his parents and his desperation to retain a hold on his self as the reality of ageing and the changing seasons take a toll on him ('When time becomes a scary movement' in *A Dead Life*). His cup of morning tea is 'strange' as he remembers the broken and worn-out past, his whisky is almost a metaphor throughout the book. The poet has no answers to the questions posed to him. He himself wants to question others but finds that in those attempts to frame his questions, he remains forever condemned, and ultimately, silent (*Song of Experience*). He is, above all, a brutal witness to the sordid world where the privilege and consolation of his verses seem fake in the presence of the women who chip stones by the wayside, or the little 'retard' boy who plays in his jerry-can car with the dogs (*Privileges* and *There Lives This Boy*). The poet is a cynic who is appalled by the cravenness and absurdity of human life (most beautifully explored in the Whitmanesque last poem *As I Look Around*), but the poet is also an innocent who is able to wonder at the abstraction of ideals and yearn for freedom ('After all, that is how / patriots are born - made' in *Freedom Song*), and ask why life could not be simpler ('Say like a cow grazing in a meadow' in *Losing Connection*). But for all the nuanced perplexity of life, the final voice of the poet is one that affirms life, that sings of its resilience.

The poems evoke an unmistakable sense of passing time and explore the futility and necessity of seeking happiness in our mortal lives.

The title poem 'Dancing to Death' is arresting in its imagery - the trees resemble old inkpots from within which come forth endless birdsongs, history is written on their trunks and it is for us to ascertain their roots, the night of the fireflies is powder gold and then with a shiver at an old thought, it is cracked open by the moon, and while the poet's father begs the gods for forgiveness and the mother chops onion rings, the poet (in the mind of the reader, the 'you') wonders why the moon looks so high up from the mountains and so close up from the plains? There is a deep sense of metaphysical contemplation of the rhythms of nature that continue in the face of an everyday dying ('for nature never wrote a dirge for the dead / only you and I, we wail at the grave'), and the darkness entwined with

distant beauty ('but darkness was here always / and probably that distant beauty too / just the history went unwritten / and unnoticed in this part of the world').

There is a certain zen quality to most of the poems that take up a fleeting, ineffable sensation and weave a texture of memory around it (*The Call* or *I am Screwed, Too* or *37 Years* or *Calling Byron*).

The Anglo-European sensibility of romanticism in the poems is undeniable. Without seeking to be parochially appealing to a 'native' marketing that would focus on incense, lhakhangs, mountains and monks, the poems are refreshingly honest and claim influences from the larger world of imagination. The poems are rich with references to glass-seas and bloody skies (*The Sky and The Sea*), to Dante, Quixote, and Icarus, to the artist Munch (even as unstated scenes by Magritte lurk in the backdrop). The poems will reward you with references as diverse as Eusebius or Victor Pelevin (a Roman historian theologian and a contemporary Russian novelist).

The gems are scattered evenly through the book - there are 'dreams dreaming each other in a vile conspiracy' (*Maimed*; something that reminded me of Milan Kundera's novel *Life is Elsewhere*), the guilt that persists like the hair on your body (*Getting in Mood*), the rain that spies like a filthy voyeur on the lovers indoors in the summer (*That Summer*), sun-burnt dreams peeling off badly in the night sky (*Raving*). And, one can only imagine how it feels to 'lick the smithereens of our forsaken dreams / from the teaspoons and the coffee cups' (*Game Players*).

Erato, the muse of lyrical poetry, has certainly visited the poet of this collection in various guises, and left him lingering somewhere between the 'shortage of breath' and the 'excess of life' (*Beneath the Skin*). In the poem *Desertion*, there are the telling words: 'Such brave lunacy lies in sanctuary now'. Indeed, for the most part it does. But, look carefully, and there remains the comradeship of some brave lunatics who are still around: 'To erase the emptiness and / unveil the latticework of life's miracles' (*Don't Ever Ask Me How*).

We suffer to narrate the pleasures of our pains. And the worthy verses here are stunning in their ability to convert the poet's pain into our pleasure. Do read!

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www.nitashakaul.com Nitasha is a London-based writer, poet and scholar. Her novel *Residue* was shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2009. She is a Bhutan specialist, has often lived in Bhutan and taught the first-ever university level creative writing course at RTC in 2010. An anthology of young Bhutanese writing titled "*November Light: An anthology of creative writing from Bhutan*" will be launched by her at the Mountain Echoes literature festival on Sunday 22 May 2011.

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