

In Rositta Joseph's hands, poetry engages deftly with the world's despair and angst, conjuring a balm that is as precious as it is potent, and as capable of compounding insight as it is of begetting light. Sweeping across sentiments and visions that range from the personal to the social and from the mundane to the mythic, these poems assert their worth by a steady command over language, an honest plumbing of emotions, a clear vision of life's complexities, and a bold foray into the intricacies of philosophical negotiation. Should the world, again, betray, will there be revenge? For Rositta, these poems are both retribution and resurrection--an awakening in poetry that we are thrilled to witness.

Dr. Basudhara Roy

Rositta Joseph Valiyamattam's collection of sixty-three poems blows like a fresh morning breeze over a landscape littered with pretentious approximations of poetry – the curse of modernism and postmodernism. The greats of modernist and postmodernist poetry indeed did a great disservice – they spawned poet pretenders who believe that fragments make poems. These poems proliferate on the printed page and the internet – mere words, without feelings. That's where Rositta's poems mark a departure. Her lines are expressions of deeply felt emotions, and they tug at the heartstrings of the reader. The contemporary merge seamlessly into the eternal and the mythical into the topical. This slim volume is definitely one for keeps!

Dr. Sangeetha Puthiyedath

A Poet's Promise

Rositta Joseph



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A POET'S PROMISE

by **Rositta Joseph**

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*For my Daddy
Mr. Joseph Valiyamattam
who first believed in my poems,*

*for Gitanjali Ghei (1961-1977)
whose verses conquered death,*

and

*for Jayanta Mahapatra (1928-2023)
who made me feel, like never before,
the power of poetry.*

*The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow,
The devotion to something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow?*

'To..' by Percy Bysshe Shelley

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

'Ulysses' by Alfred Lord Tennyson

Foreword

Meher Pestonji

In an age of instant gratification where internet offers immediate publication on poetry sites and poets are challenged to write a poem a day, Rositta Joseph has chosen to stand apart by publishing her first collection of poetry after thirty years, revealing a rare maturity.

It's worth the wait, for we see the trajectory of her growth from an idealistic adolescent

Racing against
That undefeated tyrant
Called time ('A Poet's Promise')

to the mature woman

Dancing gracefully
Without protest
With a smile
On the tightrope
Between
Love and Hate
Laughter and Tears

Selflessness and Selfishness

Hope and Despair ('A Fine Balance').

Yes, the journey to maturity is a long meander with triumphs and challenges.

I'm privileged to have observed Rositta's growth from her doctoral thesis on the role of literature in rewriting national history from the margins to her flowering into a passionate literature professor. Teaching is central to her life, enabling her to go

Riding on the crests of the tallest minds

Diving into the depths of the deepest souls

('For the Love of Literature').

Drawing on her literary explorations, she crafts poetry imbued with philosophical wisdom yet as contemporary as her students:

We found a soulmate in AI

And a philosopher in ChatGPT.

The Truth has died

Laughing at

The heights

We have reached ('Post Truth').

The young Rositta celebrates falling in love. For her, love is not a conventional giving over of body and soul to the loved one. She categorically states,

I had very clear ideas about space,

Until

You intruded into

My well-guarded queendom.

And ever so stealthily,

Made it your own ('Space').

Fiercely guarding independence, she describes her fiercely feminist relationship in an amazingly honest voice.

I am the one
You think you know
But you never really know.
Not appealing, but powerful
Not soothing, but meaningful.
I have swallowed
All your darkness
Borne all your pain.

Look at me, man,
I am your
Ego-crushing truth
Soul-searing solace
I have let you win,
You cannot bear loss
I have glorified my sorrow,
You can never bear
The pain you inflict ('Deep Brown Ocean').
This is tenderness camouflaged in soul strength.

Travelling, another passion, takes Rositta to many cities from Hyderabad to Ahmedabad as well as to jungles. From Tirumala, she hears about a tiger killing a five-year-old child with predictable reactions from villagers and officials while the bereaved parents sit with heads bowed. Discarding fake sympathy she views the situation with candid pragmatism:

No one sees
The gleaming truth
Of one tender tiger,
Divinely ordained
To end in
The swift and

Soft jungle way
A tiny life destined for
Endless misery
In the inhuman
Company of
Human beings ('Tiger At Tirumala').

Travel also takes her to pilgrimage places questioning physicality with childish rebellion. She enters the Tanjore temple asking,

Why should fort after fort,
Wall after wall,
Protect an old temple? ('The Temple At Tanjore').

Soon the spiritual ambience seeps into her being and she confesses,

Questions enter first,
Dragging me after.
Stunned by the enormity
Of what I almost missed,
Consciousness freezes
Into time travel and
A desperate
Struggle for words...
How do you paint paradise
Or communicate the cosmos?
(('The Temple At Tanjore').

Taking nothing for granted, Rositta remains open to questioning her own preconceptions. That's what makes her a great teacher and mentor. And her poems, gems of eternal value.

Critical Introduction

A Poet's Courage as the Promise to Fight for Right(s)

Arjuna Parakrama

Rositta Joseph's is a poetry of commitment, the strident voice of her social conscience writ large, and yet she has accomplished this through a humility and self-deprecation that conveys her social critique without being judgmental of us her readers, nor, indeed, of the general public, though she spares no one who abuses privilege or power. Her overarching theme and concern is the outcome of injustice, suffering and exploitation, in relation to which her focus remains public and altruistic, even when it is deeply personal, as she writes

Yet, my tears fall
For other broken hearts
And myriad desperate voices
Piercing the skies. . . .

Compassion is your gift to me,
Mother. ('Velankanni')
This "gift" of compassion is always concrete and

specific, never vague or platitudinous, as she seeks to better understand sociopolitical problems and more fully engage with core concerns of inequality, so that she may catalyse change that is systemic. Her poetic task is to unmask the bedrock injustice that pre-determines the future of the “toiling peasant child”, following in the footsteps of her parents, so that we may work to change, meaningfully and sustainably what Joseph despairingly describes as the inescapable sorrow that lies in wait.

Shall I speak of three ages in one age?
Three nations in one?
Or three worlds in one world? [. . .]

The toiling peasant’s child
Will sit on mud floors
Begin learning what the rest of the world has finished
Just enough to toil like enslaved
fathers and mothers [...]

One equaliser for all
Innocence at the beginning
Sorrow at the end
Always Inescapable. (‘Equaliser’)

Hence, her rejection of the structural and epistemic brutality of our times is trenchant and unequivocal. In an epoch where “third world” poetry is turning inward in troublingly self-indulgent and depoliticized ways, Joseph’s voice resonates a radically different perspective. In this next example, her scathing critique of elite hypocrisy uses a conventional image of the mask but with a powerful twist that awakens us to the fact that these masks become the

person hiding inside, disfiguring and dehumanizing them as captured in the pain-invoking image of stitching flesh, made more troubling by the deliberate blurring of the us/ them distinction. Is there no difference then between the elites as drivers of injustice and us as those who accept and confirm to it, when truth is the real casualty?

Permanent actors
With masks
Stitched to our souls. [. . .]

The Truth has died
Laughing at
The heights
We have reached. ('Post Truth')

Yet, it is simplistic to see her understanding of the magnitude of the forces arrayed against justice as always being able to prevail over the ethical. While it is true that at moments in the poetry, as seen in the lines quoted above, Joseph feels lost and despairing, at other times her courage and conviction come through equally strongly on the side of the angels of hope:

All is never lost
For
Those who walk
The straight and narrow path
In a crooked world. ('Return to School')

"All is never lost" and thus her impatience with all kinds of hypocrisy and self-seeking rationalizations is as refreshing as it is insightful. Joseph's poetry is not of

the kind that comes from privilege or dalliance. In the words of another poet, she has “paid its price”, as she asserts, [I]

Have neither the time nor the money
For the ‘right’ kind of holidays,
Have lived in a hurry
From one futile struggle to another – (‘Rebel’).

The fact that she can calmly and matter-of-factly confirm “I know the limits of my time and my purse” (‘Rebel’) raises the value and opportunity cost of her writing beyond self-indulgence and classist fashion. Her life is characterised by the “hurry” imposed by the bombardment of issues and catastrophes demanding her undivided attention.

Rositta Joseph’s poetic courage is infectious, all the more so because it is far from being dogmatic or propagandist, and hence simplistic. Her range includes deeply personal poems, which acknowledge and celebrate the core influences in shaping her thought and action. Especially moving is her tribute to her father for empowering and nurturing her growth. In terms of poetic skill, note the daring use of the single line occupied by “To” which dangles tantalizingly, creating both doubt and expectation, that fittingly culminates in the juxtaposition of the infinite (the universe) with the most mundanely concrete (the ground under her feet).

Of a most charming man,
Who alone possesses the power
To
Put the universe
Under my feet. (‘Father’s Day’)

Joseph demonstrates a rare skill in being able to articulate hidden political truths where others only see the stark beauty of nature, while at the same time opening up this natural space for wonder and enjoyment. The poem 'Kaveri' provides such an example of this skill.

Kaveri, do we know each other
From a previous birth? [. . .]

They try to claim you
Both religion and tradition
But Kaveri, you free spirit,
As the ancient tribals
Of your Coorgi forests
You belong to no one.
Dipping my fingers
In your soul- cooling water [. . .]

How many Chola champions
Have suckled on your breasts;
In your waters they baptized
Their endless empire
Of Thanjavur and Trichy.

The fraught complicity between exploitation of people and the manipulation of nature is subtly but surely expressed here, as compounded through the political and ideological use of tradition, culture and religion to serve the interests of power. And yet the river flows on, its "soul-cooling water" shared across all divides and differences, its "free spirit" uncontaminated.

In the poem 'The Temple at Tanjore', deceptively simple questions strike at the heart of the nexus between

institutionalised religion and the entrenchment of political power for personal gain.

Why should fort after fort,
Wall after wall,
Protect an old temple?
Questions enter first,
Dragging me after. [. . .]

This ode to
Enormity and symmetry?

This realisation has led the poet to reject conventional belief and its rituals, but not spirituality itself.

My idols have crumbled,
My ideals shaken,
My heart broken,
I look down at icons that tumbled. [. . .]

To live in a world at war with itself [. . .]
(‘Innocence At Eighteen’)

This reflects the views of the poetic persona at eighteen, which becomes further refined and larger-than-personal, identifying the bigger picture.

Worship becomes woe
Faith turns fanatic
Religion looks revolting. [. . .]

Then, just one prayer
To be

Religionless
Stateless
And
Godless. ('Just One Prayer')

These lines are as forceful as they are courageous, coming from both the heart and the head, from someone who has lived this pain. Many will think this but few dare to say it out loud, and hardly anyone with this poetic power that yet retains real anguish.

One of the most important and unique characteristics of Joseph's poetry is her ability to nuance and delineate socioeconomic class, situating herself within her critique of classed values and norms, as seen in 'Middle-Class Indian Memories'.

[. . .]

Endless love affairs with libraries
Western fairy tales and Eastern folk tales [. . .]

First job, first book
First dreams and first promises
To change the world [. . .]

Sly memory
Brings me a silk saree or a story book
A picture I drew or a look
From loving eyes
A coffee or a cake or fresh lemon juice from mother's
hands
The scent of rain drops on dry earth
Teacher father's smile reflected on my students' faces
Sister's sister talk,

Lover's laughter
And I forget everything
Except for the memory of
Pure joy.

The middle-class here is marked by its self-absorption and aggrandisement. Yet, the challenge is to remain aloof and unmoved from the gentle critique of our classed preoccupation with books in libraries on the one hand, and the (false) dichotomy between westernization and nativization, or more realistically the crazy mix we have all inhabited in our childhood. Then, there is for her “no greater peace /Than to come home.”

One cannot but help noting the shift from the naively impractical idealism of youth (first job, first book ... to change the world), which is again a function of this aggrandisement of the middle class as change agents for the underclass, and hence not innocent. This movement then leads to the soft and lyrical section with which the poem ends by invoking the cherished moments of middle-class life, at once ordinary and special, trivial and momentous, small and large. The love and protection of family is beautifully captured in a few poignant images, exquisitely wrought to invoke the feelings that transcend narrow class boundaries but are still firmly rooted in the middle-class milieu. To universalize these is the trap that Joseph refuses to embrace, situating them in her past as their essence and not their trappings.

It is because of her hard-won awareness that Joseph is able to recognise that this life and its values are also limiting, even misleading if one wants to see the larger picture and to intervene in the bigger battles. In ‘Memories’, a haunting

poem that both embraces and fights nostalgia, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, she writes

We live in the past,
The present seems dead,
The future is too fragile,
Vanishing before we visualise.
From the faint lingering warmth
of ancient embraces,
Out of the fading imprints
of old sight-seeing journeys,
Over the scanty fragrance of
the free breaths we took aeons ago,
We fight to live. [. . .]

Prisoners in our own houses,
Separated from most of what we cherish,
We cling on to the feather
That can give us new life -
Memories.

In the last lines, the poem pushes beyond the immediate confines of its pandemic context to encapsulate a broad principle of contemporary life, unable to resist or contest the tragic developments of our times, be they at home or abroad. Ours is a generation marked by the normalization of violence, the fetishization of disparity. Joseph is only too aware of

Wrong choices to stay back in wrong places
In a wrong land, with wrong people[.]
(‘Return to School’)

Yet, ultimately, the poems and the poet are irrepressible. Like 'Lakshmi Bai' and the heroines in 'The Phoenixes of Bombay', Joseph is "A heart / Embracing the universe." She recognises the fragility of this moment, the hugeness of the task ahead of her, the disappointments that are inevitable:

I have fallen from the sky
A hundred times;
Surviving
Only because
Someone
Had softly spread
My dreams
On the ground. ('A Fine Balance')

Her solution is to think globally, to envision planetarily, and still to remain firmly rooted to the earth and its people. Poetry is an avocation, not a pastime, wherein she asks rhetorically,

Is writing one poem per day
Enough to fool yourself? ('Waiting to be Refuted')

Instead, Joseph demands of herself and the world to

Give me wings
Make me a child
That I may give to each
In body, mind,
Heart and soul. ('Two Worlds')

These poems share with us the poet's special wings

that allow her to survey the universe of her values, yet to see through the eyes of a child as if for the first time, while at the same moment to plant the seeds of her dreams on the ground, so that all who wish may hear.

Poet's Note

Rositta Joseph

A poem is deeply personal and undeniably universal at the same time. It is this magical quality of poetry that has given me the confidence to share my inmost feelings with all of you. I fervently hope that these feelings will be understood and echoed in a myriad ways.

My first poem came at the age of ten or eleven, when I had my first glimpse of the magnificent Arabian Sea from the southwestern coast of India. It was a one-liner that went like this: "As the waves of the sea cover the sand, again and again, winning a victory, so shall I win a victory over evil..." It was a child's expression of awe at Nature's power and glory interspersed with the value system she had been exposed to. Though I had no knowledge of similes and metaphors, and extremely childish though the attempt was, my father's unbounded enthusiasm in appreciating my outburst meant the world to me. Then began the adventure of adding poems to my diary whenever something or someone touched my small world, followed by the unconditional admiration of my parents and sometimes

embarrassing poetry readings before guests and friends and relatives.

However, the spark was firmly lit and did not die out despite all the challenges life threw at me, testing my faith and hope and self-belief. As I grew out of childhood, poetry writing continued, but no longer for other ears. It was more of a private ritual that was meant to affirm my faith in my own abilities and to help me deal with life in a more positive manner. It was the struggle to release volcanic, cyclonic emotions and to stand apart from the crowd. Despite the lack of self-confidence that kept these poems unpublished for close to three decades now, I did nurture a secret dream that one day these poems would see the light of day and be welcomed to formally merge themselves with the larger ocean of human thought and feeling.

So, as I humbly place a piece of my heart and mind and soul before the readers, I wish to reiterate the simplicity of my poems. Despite my encounters with literature and literary theories, canonical poetry and varied schools of poets, the innocent child who first wrote those simple lines inspired by the ocean dominates my work. Yes, these poems are emotions recollected in tranquillity; they are a letting loose of emotion and a distancing from emotion; they are a reflection of my personality and a running away from the self; they are a means to escape into an imaginary and better world; they are also weapons to face the challenges of life. While some of them are allies for hard times, others just reflect the bitter truths of life.

The sixty-three poems gleaned from close to three decades of writing are arranged into different sections. These sections are ordered in the manner in which my life has evolved over the years: from poetry as an innocent pleasure to a passion. This collection begins with the love

for Nature that inspired my first poems, moving on to my encounters with varied human relationships and emotions, to the spirituality that has often been tested but emerged as a strong rock amid all the turbulence of life, to the unquenchable thirst for literature as a student and teacher, the quest for and finding of true love, the experiences gained from fond memories of travel and exploration across the country and beyond, the reflections upon the myriad contemporary worlds we inhabit, the assertion of womanhood in its pain and glory, and finally the section titled 'Survival' wherein poetry becomes both a record and a means of battling all odds.

Nevertheless, all the poems are bound together by one thread – 'A Poet's Promise'. As promised in the first two poems in this collection, every poem is an offering of love to the readers. These poems embody existence, identity, struggle, survival, and above all, raw humanity. Through moments of despair and elation, light and darkness, they have been my catharsis, inspiration and undying hope.

Poetry is born, I believe, when experience exceeds words, and words find fulfilment in serving as mere pointers and maps guiding us to a treasure trove of human emotions. Each of us explore and live these emotions in our own ways. I am grateful for this privilege of sharing my journey with you, a journey we can enjoy both individually and together, for it is finally 'our' journey.

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Over these years, scores of dedicated teachers, talented students and inspiring colleagues have motivated me to keep writing poetry. The poets I have read, studied and admired, ancient and modern, young and old, from every part of the globe, have played a key role in keeping my small lamp burning all through. Above all, I am deeply

thankful to life itself, to Nature, to the varied experiences and places and persons I have come across. Every single day has shaped my poems.

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Professor Arjuna Parakrama, globally renowned human rights activist, author, poet and former professor of literature at Colombo and Peradeniya universities is someone I literally adore. His unwavering commitment to defending the rights of the voiceless amid the harshest conditions is unparalleled for its raw courage and devotion to the truth. Thank you so much, Arjuna, for finding time to write a detailed and exceptional critical introduction for this volume of poetry. It means the world and beyond to me and will always be one of the proudest moments of my life.

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- Rositta Joseph

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