

**Siddharth Dasgupta*****ALL THESE STREETS WE'VE KNOWN BY HEART***

(Excerpts)

**I See God in the Strangest Places**

like that point on maneckji mehta road  
where the pole from the scaffolding of  
leftover earth meets the truant branch  
of a nearby banyan tree, their union  
resulting in the birth of a cross that  
rests there, oblivious to the municipality,  
since god loves one and all.

or the tattered insides of a rickshaw  
painted garish, with the devoutly hindu  
driver proudly having pasted a poster  
of an impossibly-haired hindi film actor  
staring into the myth of impossible fame,  
and that one line that weaves india, bharat,  
faith, and deliverance into the one  
impossible dream—Shah Rukh Khan  
is God.

even that crumbling shop that passes  
for a photo studio, once famed for both  
processing and restoring negatives,  
now consigned to negative space and  
a sort of graceful ennui where i can't  
even make out its name on the broken

wooden board, but peering deep into  
residues stored on shelves and in books,  
i come upon the frozen dark light of what  
looks like jesus—plumes and all.

and then there's my skin—the marks  
that have made themselves home since  
birth; the goodbye of a tumour, the  
finality of its absence; scuffed knees  
and wounded heart; the streaks on my  
arms, vigilantes, like shooting stars—  
all of them, to me, appear to be god  
—in visage, in bursts of sudden poetry.

i see god in bakeries, in the way  
this nankhatai resembles a crouching  
ganesha; in the way flourishes of icing  
and the assembly of crisp crusts,  
resemble, variously, a perfect crescent  
moon, or the portrait of a multitude  
gathered in their thousands, before  
an audience of waves.

i suppose the only place i don't see god  
is in the temple, within the stainedglass  
stillness of a rousing mosque,  
within the antiquated romance of a  
sunday mass—i see beauty here,  
perfectly-portioned, faithfully-rationed  
—but i don't see god.

for god, i roam the private geographies  
of a city, i drop into the afternoon ennui  
of a bakery or two; i have cloud formations  
and the fractals of damaged light; i have  
my body—the cartography of its marks,  
the typography of its heart, its arms,  
its other terrific loyalists—

and yes, i have shah rukh khan.

### **Nin-ah**

Nina Simone wasn't Nina Simone. She was born Eunice Waymon. I only mention this because I've been having one of my Nina phases of late, when nothing else seems to stick. Even in the throes of her majesty—rasp rising in ferocity, those words sewn in a different kind of silk, that sensual vigour laced with pride and carelessness—you can hear her, you can sense her, trying to get away from herself. *Where she gonna' run to?* Maybe Nina had no desire to be Nina either. But she could only ever have been Nina. Allow the needle to fall on Sinnerman. Then To Love Somebody. Then Nobody's Fault But Mine. *Where she gonna' run to?* The legend goes that during performances, especially those in her favourite hunting-grounds of Paris, she would stop midway during a song. Hush. Even time holding its breath, never mind the crowd. She would walk up to her guitarist, whisper a little nothing in his ear, anything really—wanting to take a song somewhere else, the fickleness of a broken heart, the weather, anything—before returning to her place in the cosmos and picking up from where she'd left off. Just like that. On a whim. The drama. *Where she gonna' run to?* I run to desire, and the way it feels on my skin. I run to the love I've made, left behind in hotels and apartments and coastlines and those parts of the memory that seem hell-bent on redemption. This is an accumulation of life, across exiles and the soft assurances of a hometown. This is a poem of life, with stanzas gathered from the humans and the addresses of the past, and stanzas lying blank for the humans and the cities of tomorrow to drop, as destined petals. *Where she gonna' run to?* To whoever knows the song. To whoever memorises the words.

Ah spring, aimless  
In a Paris of drunk myth  
So here a song, sip

### ***THE SACRED SORROW OF SPARROWS***

(Story Excerpt)

#### **THE BAKER FROM KABUL**

Dawn; the haunting echoes of morning prayer lingered in the air. A large, disjointed colony of birds began to flutter with abandon, making their way excitedly to a designated address. They knew the man would soon be there.

Along the creek—the same ancient, meandering creek that had given birth to a city now bearing almost no resemblance to its older self—danced a row of small restaurants, bakeries, *shawarma* stalls, and decades-old family-run grocery stores, their reflections shimmering in the water as it swayed to the morning’s silent song.

A very tiny number of them had been sleepily opening their eyes, their shutters being pulled up and their doors being unlocked by similarly sleepy owners. They weren’t exactly at the water’s edge, distanced from the to and fro by a slender sliver of pavement that circled its way all along the creek; a remarkable journey that managed to traverse two entirely different halves of the city, and with it, a wealth of stories, immigrants, and reflections. And yet their identities—a pensive collage of hopes and fears and dreams that would neither be shaken nor easily fulfilled—managed to leap out with defiance and land into the water with a finality that seemed to say, ‘Hey look, this is who I am, you might as well get used to me.’

The streets were still, bereft almost entirely of human life. An ocean of mosques had begun dispelling a few faithful, their simultaneously cascading waves of dawn’s *Fajr* having abated no more than a few moments ago. A few night-crawlers were stumbling out of the night’s excesses—played out either in someone’s home or a sufficiently exclusive, sufficiently secretive

party. There were those who had succumbed to the lure of lust. The morning's rays having brought about a sudden realisation of the truth, they were now having to come to terms with the little matter of shame, followed by its more potent relative, atonement. All of them put together numbered none too many.

By the creek, the haphazardly functional flock of pigeons, seagulls, and the occasional lark were getting a touch restless.

*Where could he be?*

### ***A MOVEABLE EAST***

(Excerpt)

#### **A Date, an Address, and Little Else**

Stop sending me postcards from cities  
where we made love. Time-stamped. Time  
stamps. Everything reduces beneath gloss  
—the quietude to a forgotten piazza;  
the sad, old men of Damascus; the cafés  
where a day lingers as prelude and étude  
—everything made shiny, with the kiss  
of age all but burnished away.

Stop writing to tell me that the cities  
were better last time around. That's what  
happens with repeated pleasure—it sucks  
at the marrow of flavour, and memory.

It leaves the first gasp orphaned. It leaves  
the first touch a distant happiness, like

that time you stumbled into snow,  
the time you swallowed its foreignness  
with the tongue of a parched Sufi.  
Stop sending me mementoes from  
Alicante and San Sebastián. Stop  
sending me your exhalation, impressed  
upon rectangular bits of paper from  
Costa Nova and Sintra. What does this  
mean to a poet, oceans removed, who  
carries old bookshops within his heart,  
and wears the timbre of seaside shisha  
as though it were an illicit perfume...  
The delinquencies of the seasons.  
Globules of incremental blood. Your  
stuttering breath, licked on postage and  
left behind, like a quantum of ancestral  
weight. Coasting on the adamant ferocity  
of phrase, I write this down and send it to  
you, aware of the perils of nomadic flight.  
Stop sending me poems on familiar paper,  
you reply. Everything's precious, until  
it's airmailed away.

### ***VILLA SHANTI***

(Story Excerpt)

Come dusk, the sea is a provocation. It rises and advances in orchestrated majesty, before pulling back with the mischief of giddy sparrows. The skies over Pondicherry are the vivid blues and

purples and hot pinks of the ice pops him and his friends would steal from the hapless *chuskiwala* after school.

The few days since seeing her at Villa Shanti, immersed in Pondicherry, he's felt the rush of blood and beauty in his skin again after many years. He no longer feels the chokehold of a drunkard father. And his body feels lighter—aligned entirely to these mustard-coloured walls, sprigs of sudden bougainvillea, nuns cycling to or from Pondicherry's defining Aurobindo Ashram, and little by-lanes heading nowhere in particular—all of which he remembers, in surround-sound fidelity, from his childhood.

He has a late breakfast of smoked garlic prawns and thick local bread, beneath the slowly turning vintage fans beset with lethargy at Coromandel Café. He steps back out on Romain Rolland and walks the length of this street he knows by heart—the olive green of an old villa peeping out in between an untamed hedge of chrysanthemum; the unnamed café that sells chai, breakfast rolls, and nothing else; the small boutiques promising travellers an enduring vestige of Pondicherry... those quadrants where a perpendicular side-street arrives, and the sea opens up like a gush of wildflowers.

He takes long, slow strides, without agenda. The dull mustard walls of the old cinema house come into view, and he promises himself to drop by for a French or Hindi classic at some point. As he enters the tree-lined boulevard of Surcouf Street, making his way towards Dumas Street, he hears a choir and immediately knows it's arising from Église de Notre-Dame des Anges—the Church of Our Lady of Angels—its salmon-coloured walls and Greco-Roman air reminding him of childhood Sundays, with him tagging along with some French friends to stare at the arresting stained glass depictions of Jesus, Mary, and a clutch of saints whose names he could never remember.

He takes Bazaar Saint Laurent and enters Goubert Avenue, Pondicherry's main promenade. No longer muffled by the rows of bungalows, cafés, trees, and old French colonial buildings that populate the inner streets, the sea explodes in sensorial magnificence—a startling expanse of white, grey, and dark green, stretched across all the way to a horizon tinged with a startling deep

orange. This is the Pondicherry he has known for a large portion of his life—a place where your skin gets accustomed to the idea of magic.

And yet, that tinge of sadness lingers like a persistent shadow. He eases himself down on a white-coloured bench that sits facing the sea, on one end of the boulevard. Much of the sadness he puts down to the strange lull of coastal life, a sort of blanket that wraps Pondicherry with inexplicable frequency. But he realises it's also the matter at hand—this conceivable selling off of Villa Roja, and in doing so, saying goodbye to a life, to Pondicherry. The finality of saying goodbye to her.

He's met three prospective buyers over the past two days, each willing to offer the family their asking amount for Villa Roja. But he's found some reason or the other to say no. Now, sitting on the bench, he wonders why it's so hard to break away from this parade—childhood, memories, that first kiss, the rush of flesh and blood, Pondicherry's beautiful aching charms, that whiff of southern drama, the lure of this operatic sea, and above it, those operatic skies.

So much of his life has been played out here—in just these four-odd streets that make up Pondicherry's French Town, together with their small gathering of side-streets, perpendicular lanes, and unnamed gullies. Just four-odd streets. He marvels at the sheer giddy simplicity of it. As a child, he thought there was a mythical invisible line that separated his French Town from Pondicherry's Tamil half, a proper town of noise and clamour and wonderful aromas emanating from kitchens and the fluid melodicism of Tamil being spoken, chewed, yelled, and spat out at rapid-fire speed. But it was the sea that always drew him back—back to his known half, with its Villa Roja, a loving mother, two likable if somewhat aloof sisters, but mostly, the sharp tug in his heart that told him his fortunes and his destiny lay here—in these four-odd streets with their procession of enigmas.

The scene building around him catches his eye. The promenade is a thriving hum of people and their private dramas—tourists staring agog at the sea, disinterested children tugging at parents' sleeves; well-heeled travellers, carrying an air of affluence; the joggers, trying to evade everyone else on the path; the odd hawker, screeching into the wind; an assembly of Ashram nuns, its pace



measured, nearly meditative; the seekers hell-bent on epiphany, or any morsel of salvation; and the lovers, of course, the lovers. Beyond the promenade, the sea growls in arranged waves of wildness. He wonders whether this quantum of sea goes and meets Bombay at some point miles into the distance.

He has loved Bombay for so long, he wonders when, or why, he fell out of love with it. Perhaps it was the overflow of hedonism, lived out every weekend, or maybe his heart had grown weary with the breakneck pace. Could it have been the heft of all those lives, being lived out in the piercing yelp of anonymity? Whatever the case, he's only acutely aware of it now, away from Bombay, back home in Pondicherry, back among the opera of birds and the coastal air and the hunger of waves and the potency of memories, all of which his body has grown into with the ease of a dance settling into an old sequence.

Her uncommon beauty sparkled like a lost diamond, the other day at Villa Shanti. And her words emerged the way he remembered from the past—in that vivid French-coastal creole of a woman born in Auroville to French parents in love with India, sent away to Paris for schooling, only to return to Auroville, and Pondicherry, as her college years began. It was a trans-continental accent that crisscrossed through age and the gauzy façade of time.

### ***ASSORTED POETRY***

(Indian & International Journals)

#### **Metropolis with Ghazal**

Come walk with me through the bones of this bustling city.

Time hedges its bets in the spit-spatter of this hustling city.

On the streets, fragrance is rampant. Catharsis of us, strained  
through the finely-woven forgetfulness of this muslin city.

A silent movie plays at the Regal. Speak to me of silence,  
lest I scream mercy in the bare fangs of this cuspid city.

You and me at the speed of sound. Leave behind a note  
for me in the rich, riotous libraries of this lovesick city.  
There is a war on TV. The ratings are high. Lay down  
your arms for me, in the bravado of this muscling city.

Mythology's all the rage. The disco dance of antiquities.  
It prospers florid as the footnotes to this tussling city.

Jesus speaks to me from a mosque that peals with temple  
bells, deep in the wide-eyed throb of this puzzling city.

Siddharth, you should leave prophecy behind. Sing, write,  
scream, prosper. Breathe. Dream up this druglicked city.

### **As a Qawwali that Duplicates Itself**

My heart is a lacuna. The lacuna deepens, accepts  
the beauty, the pin-drop fragility of love,  
of summers with dead stars and vinyl on tap.

I assume the self of I in jungles. This poem  
as a qawwali that duplicates itself. This poem  
as a ghazal, its tongue deep in the syrupy erotics

of wine. This poems as a slow hymn meant to be  
sung by idle buskers. This poem as past,  
present, and that swallowing ocean in between.

The world dreams up its neon mottos. *A dream is only a dream once you've dreamt it.* I awake to a holy afternoon of dizzy clouds and time

lapsed photographs. In this *safarnama*, I gather stories in caravanserais and break bread in chaikhanahs where the chai only speaks

in Farsi. Every jungle knows folklore, the manna of empathy. Here, I forget, if only temporarily, all about war crimes and sinking, unsalvageable

continents. My heart is the Sahara of our parched amnesias, the Zanzibar of my ethnic longing. And a city is only a city once I've dreamt it.