

## Ismail Bala

### Poems

#### The Writing Angel

“I’ve brought a poem for you,” babbled the angel,  
Descending by the desk on which I write.  
“You can scribble it in your hand  
(Here’s a plume from my feather to do that with).  
Translate it from the heavenly dialect,  
Appropriate to human comprehension.  
You can append your own by-line above it  
And rush it off to an editor—I don’t care.  
But I must leave now—many of us,  
A great number in fact, are called to attend  
A function upon a needle’s top—that same needle  
At whose left end big men and beasts  
Slide into Paradise, trudging through its eye—  
Dispossessed of their luggage. Writers  
Have luggage too and sometimes act the same”.  
Having revealed that, with gyrating of wings  
The celestial body dashed off.

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#### Dawn of Future

(Chronicle of a Democracy foretold)

I

Even though we see  
Those who envelop our skies  
Of agony dark  
With clouds slated for  
The rain of doom  
We don’t pinch our eyes  
To shed tears

We see quite openly  
Those who scrounge the gusty air  
Out of our perched noses  
Those who starve us with rotten crumbs  
From the communal bowl  
Feed us to bleed  
Bleed our veins dry  
With untainted blood

We don't taint the nuance of our voices  
With sobs of fear  
Rather  
We fortify our will  
Harden the look of our dreamful eyes  
Clasp our minds  
Tie the bold knots of our long nights  
To behold the dawn of future

We mould our shattered voices  
To sing in the gay poetry  
The sonorous jingles  
Of our communal songs

We don't spare our eyes  
On the famished sun  
Nor laugh the laughter of an uncircumcised tongue  
Rather we await the dawn of future.

## II

With the faceful moon of your faith  
Beaming the place  
We shall wait for the malarial glance  
To zoom itself out  
Didn't we outplay the contagion shots of  
The other day?

We shall wait for the day  
That belongs neither to the rodents  
Nor the hoppers  
But to the lustre of our love  
We shall wait for the appeal of April  
To subdue the severance of silence

On this place you ransom with ruthlessness

Didn't we outplay the faces of fear  
That plunders our lone hope of perseverance  
Before it could glimpse the silhouette of life?  
We shall wait for the day  
That belongs neither to the vulture  
Nor the hoppers  
But maintain convenience for the preys  
To tease ferocity out in the woods  
And we will wait

With the anthem of your age  
Mocking light  
Mourning night  
We shall tighten the grip  
On the hands of time  
For the tapped geyser of your eyes  
To dissipate itself out  
And your restless shutter contained  
By the smiling sun of redeeming year.

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### **The Poetry of Others**

Is there no lull to it  
the way they keep springing up in journals  
then conclave in the inky chapel of an anthology?

You would think the daffodil would speak out,  
but like the Muse it only inspires—then more of them appear.  
Not even the authorities can put an end to it.

Just this morning, one accosted me like a beggar,  
eyes squinting, difficult to ignore.  
Another lunged out of the cover at me like a bully.

How can anybody despise them  
when they hang about the hem of books

and humble themselves in our faces?

Perhaps I'm being mean, even frivolous.  
It could have been the day at the circus  
that left me this way—all the cast by the scripts—

as if only my poetry had the clout to be  
and readers would come up from the heavens  
in the morning to see them in cathedral of papery gods.

So I will take the word of the masters  
and put this in a cooler for a week  
possibly even a month or two and then have a harsher look at it—

but for the moment I'm going to take a breather  
through this nearly greyed place  
that is my harmattan hidey-hole, my scriptorium,

and get my eyes off the poetry of others  
even as they look down from the shelves  
or laugh at my feigning in the guise of local clowns.

*after Billy Collins*

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### **Safe Keeping**

Allow me to fetch  
My dearest one  
Fetch from the richness of your eyes  
Allow me to pluck  
My darling one  
Pluck from your lavishing smile  
Allow me to illuminate my being  
My closest pal  
Illuminate in the wealth of your merriment  
From your magnificent face  
Grant me this honour my charming one  
And I'd carve out a luminous mirror  
A spacious one  
In such a mirror

A twin reflection looks back  
Multiple reflections  
From your incandescent face  
I'd chisel out a star  
A sparkling star  
And beneath this star  
They'd behold the true east  
For all to witness  
Behold still  
Your haunting eyes and dazzling smile  
On your glowing face  
Forever shall be engraved  
Engraved in the lettering of my inscription.

*(Translated from the Hausa of Mustafa Bello Marka)*

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### **Zainabu**

Love Tambai you did Zainabu Abu  
Loved him like a ferocious winter blaze  
You ditched Haliru (for his sake)  
Despite thousands of your suitors  
Such as Kabiru who loved you madly  
But whom you've also forsaken (for Tambai)

Zainabu a true friend  
So faithful you've been to Tambai  
The one who initiated you into the art of love  
The one full of feelings for you  
He took you for what you are  
Took you away from Razak

Great wonder it is, Zainabu  
That after you've fallen for Tambai  
After he has found you  
Got hold of you  
After you've given in to him  
He then turned his back on you

What a world full of irony!  
After you've suffered and resisted forced marriage  
(Now) see how your husband let you down  
Your emotional turmoil is inestimable  
Behold your teary eyes  
In an estranged land

Now what Zainabu?  
In your present state of sorrow  
With your many kids and matrimonial responsibility  
Tambai is turning a new leaf  
Taking a new wife  
A girl named Laure  
Zainabu what a sad event!  
(Tambai has) done you a blow  
By being a friend of Barau

He has gone into evil ways  
Gone into womanizing  
Tambai has abandoned the truth.

*(Translated from Hausa of Salisu Saidu)*

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**The Bather**  
(after Charles Simic)

Where the road to the river snakes  
Out of sort, a blaze of dust,  
The kind naked winds make whirling.  
A low sky hazy with clouds  
Resting momentarily  
In the tense but sober trees.

An early bather undressing for a dive,  
Packed hair flowing down too soon  
As she flaps on her arm allowing  
The scary waves turn her  
Over the sniggering water to where the sky  
Shuts tight, the day darning

Her bareness, the splashing thin,  
Cloud edges like jarred paper dolls,  
Even the birds strangely reticent,  
The hushed laughter of the winds in the leaves  
Deceiving me to glance once again,  
Till the urge led me out and plunged in.

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### **The Mislaid Bracelet and the Bandaged Wrist**

(A Variation on a Theme by C P Cavafy)

I

Now I turn and trudge back with you,  
Our eyes rummaging the dirt for that bracelet,  
Mid-day sun so cruel it seems the very light  
Is being sabotaged and will soon be gone  
As its vast furnace dissolves.

And you,  
Squatting on your knees among pebbles and grass,  
Your shadow, lost beneath the horizon encircling us,  
Turns this submerged path into a wandering boat  
Where now we'll continuously be together,  
As time, dazzled by the day's splendour, ignores us,  
And the blood throbs in your bare wrist.

II

She said she had injured herself on a staircase, or had tumbled,  
but certainly there was some other reason  
for the injury, for the bandaged wrist.

She was reaching up the top for a shot  
she wanted to take more closely  
when the bandage came unloose. A tiny blood ran.

I tied it up for her again, wasting far too much time

over the edging; she wasn't in pain,  
and—to be candid—I liked starring at the blood.  
That blood. It was all part of love.

When she left, I found a piece torn from the bandage  
under her seat, a strip I should have dumped  
straight in the bin—but I picked up and raised it to my nose,  
and kept there a long time:  
her blood on my nose, o dear, my beloved's blood.

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### **The Crown of Love**

Now autumn chews its leaves out of my hand: we are friends.  
We take time off a nutshell and teach it how to move:  
And time turns and saunters back to its shell.

Now it's Sunday in the mirror,  
there's a space for a peaceful sleep in the dream,  
the taste of truth is in the mouth.

My eyes shift to the belly of my beloved:  
we stare at each other,  
we utter darkness to each other,  
we love each other like poppy and memory,  
we sleep in seashells like wine,  
like the sea in the crimson beams of the moon.

We stop at the window embracing, from the street they can see us,  
it is time they knew!  
it is time the stone allow itself grow into flower,  
that the unrest have a heartbeat.  
It is time there was time.

It is time.

*(From the German of Paul Celan based on literal, prose version by Michael Hamburger)*

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**Sonnet**

(For Robert Pinsky)

Morning sun on his back,  
slow irretrievable splodge  
of water against a rock.

Thick grass clambering  
over the mountain's top—  
nothing to report,

only the same river  
that keeps repeating the same  
routine under his nose

and bearing the same mood.  
Nobody to sing his song,  
no need, no one to celebrate him,

only the river's words—over  
and over, to keep it before him.

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**Big Bodies**

It is almost dark. In the river  
the frog croak,  
and the innocent grass have pushed forth  
their many alluring trap,  
and the water is tremulous.  
It is difficult sometimes, dear Lord,  
to be cheerful.  
I am more mildly made  
than the small fishes, giggling and swaddling.  
But not so mild  
as the water  
with its greedy mouth.  
I know you know nothing—

I defend on this.  
Still, there are so many big bodies in the world,  
for which I am scared.

*After Mary Oliver*

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### **Pears and Plums**

(A Variation on a Theme by Paul Muldoon; in memory of Yehuda Amichai)

To assume that, as a girl of fourteen, I would struggle  
with my first pear,  
its naked breast  
presenting itself as another trial  
of my self-control, knowing in my eyes  
that it represented something other than itself alone  
while having utterly no idea  
of its being a universal symbol of brevity.  
Brevity—right? Not temerity, if you understand  
what I am digging at. As if the open mouth  
might, for now, rule out  
the verbal hatred  
in one area of the world.  
I'm talking about pears—right?—not plums.

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### **Poetry**

Found Poem, (from *The Resistance to Poetry* by James Longenbach)

Poems inspire our trust because they don't ask to be trusted,  
Theirs is the language of self questioning.  
Metaphors that turn against themselves,  
Syntax that moves one way because it threatens to move another.  
Poems resist themselves more strenuously than they are resisted;  
But resistance to poetry is the wonder of poetry:  
We read poetry not to escape difficulty but to embrace it.

### **Life Will Do Nothing**

Life will do nothing to advance your cause  
For all that you were allowed to do:  
Death and its circumferences are the same,

And when they hack the scores down for the game,  
You'll get no marks for being yourself;  
Life will do nothing to advance your cause.

Nor should it please that somebody is to celebrate  
For the loose resolve or the good preview:  
Death and its circumferences are the same.

You looked and laughed: orders are rescinded.  
Among the known, you are unknown as, "What?"  
Life can do nothing to advance your cause.

Your trap door won't prise open? That's a fact,  
It surely is, my friend. And yet it's wrong;  
Death and its circumferences are the same.

And no one is stoking the ephemeral flame.  
A needless action, for you always knew  
Life would do nothing to advance your cause:  
Death and its circumferences are the same.

### **Rising from Death**

Last night, while the stars were present, I  
watched Amanda wipe death from  
her face. Watched her hummed her way up  
the road and saw all the mourners surprised, paper  
cups frozen at their  
mouths while their elegies about celebrating evil and the  
pleasure of death, stammered.

Halted. Now the morning, just spun, looks  
lazy, tired, as if dawn itself were spent. As if  
it laboured to lay-up the light. Its heavy  
brow wrinkled with  
rain. On the road a timid tree trembles, the light a  
pitcher on her clumsy hands.

### **Just Like in the Horror Films**

Just like in the horror films  
when the character realises that the telephone calls  
are blaring from within the house

so too, I discovered  
that our passionate over-doting  
has been playing itself only within me.

All that tenderness, the kisses and dates—  
it's just been me ringing myself  
then picking up the call in another room

to find nobody on the other end,  
except, sometimes a scaring chuckling  
but most of the time, silence.

To know that all this while—  
which would include the jolly rides,  
the hobby hugs, and all the gifts—

it's been only me and a couple of phones,  
this one on the corner at the attic  
and the other in the cobwebbed spare room downstairs.

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**The Exercise**

In the morning when I found Death  
sleeping lazily on the sofa,  
I took up her parasol from the rack  
and placed its height over my head.

It would cover me on the hot walk  
into the town for bread and the lighter  
and I believed she would not care,  
not after our short chat the day before.

How unheralded her glistering fury  
when I returned drenched with rain,  
the way she looked through the intricate wires  
making sure no major character or Andean queen  
had live on and become eternal in the heavy rain.

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**After and Before**

I want to reach there late when the mopping  
has since been done and you can't smell detergent.  
Or when, in the restaurant, tomato and onion  
walk all the way down the salad and the garnishing's  
just right. Or after the shop closes, when mountains  
of mangoes and pineapples still exhibit sign of ageing.  
When the lawn's been formerly raked, the roses raided  
and everything said that could be misinterpreted.

Or before. When traces of tyres and flattened cans  
show where the campfire has been lit.  
When the beds are done and the guests ushered.  
When the repair van drives in and the house  
seems like a crime-scene. When there is all the traffic.  
When everything has gone right that is going to go right,  
all the fixings have been done and grasses begin  
to find their ways through the garden.

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### **When I Gather My Short**

When I gather my short  
pitch-black hair  
and weave of it a bun

and tie the knot of my head  
and place it back  
with iron ribbons

I'm on your face again  
my eyes are on the sky  
my vision is distance upon distance

I sense you sticking the devil  
on my head and the thin plait  
of you within me

I'm set now to leave  
a grim public plaza  
where I am the busker the judge a seer

I tilt my head  
and everyone I look  
feels what it can be to be looked at

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### **After the Lean Harvest, Lord, its Time**

After the lean harvest, Lord, its time  
to lay your hands firmer on the hourglass  
and in the night let the wild ghosts prowl.

As for the fulsome fruits, hasten them to sweetness.  
Beam on them three days of gentler wind  
to tango them down towards their time, and hound  
the final few tinges of brightness through the day.

Whosoever's penniless now, will save no dime;  
who lives aloof will live continuously so,  
wandering on to write wee, drab oblong poems,

and, along the town's alleys,  
ruefully ponder, when the giant gloom retires.

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### **Where We Come From**

Old habits live long, as in class  
we pass the pen between us like a stamp  
of despair. One of you today.  
The demeanours are different, little passions  
bursting up across the desk. They have put  
a book on the side over which  
we tactfully ignore our memory.

How do you dream? Something fishy  
like Our Vow flips out. I know  
you are still too thrifty to pay the debt.  
Our new hearts wait behind us surprisingly,  
with the silent shocks. I think  
of all the easiness of gain but, yes,  
I'm satisfied now. Yes. Satisfied. Now.

Dear, whatever it was that filled  
such bound pages with word  
has long been done. It is a book,  
measures history. Perhaps the cover.  
I see our ethics continuously eroded as  
you switch to yours the manner you used  
to switch to me. I switch to mine. And

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