

reaching for stones
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chandran nair
**reaching
for stones**
collected poems (1963-2009)

with an introduction by edwin thumboo



dedicated to

*my wife, ivy and
my daughters, radha, meera and chandrika*

acknowledgements

to my wife, ivy, for patiently sitting up nights
to type the manuscript and for all her support
throughout the years as the keenest “fan” of
my poetry:

she not only surrendered
she also gave

(thirty years)

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author's notes

This book represents almost the sum totality of poems written between 1963 and 2009. The majority of these were published in *Once the Horsemen and Other Poems* (1972) and *After the Hard Hours, This Rain* (1975). Between 1975 and 2009, while the odd poem was written and some appeared in anthologies, after the move to Karachi in 1981, painting became the dominant motif.

Looking back (and given the stark social inequalities, the beginnings of religious intolerance, the sheer beauty of the Pakistani landscape – the magnificent coastal waters of the Arabian sea, the verdant Punjab plains, the undulating Sindhi deserts, which did provide the background to a sequence of poems, the foothills of the Himalayas), in those four years between 1981 and 1985, more poetry could have been expected.

Instead and unashamedly, life was lived between air-conditioned home, air-conditioned car and air-conditioned office (it was after all 40°C in the shade), an expatriate social life composed of children's birthday parties, dinners and lunches and outings to the French beach at Sandspit.

Moving to Paris in 1985, into the need to learn French on the run and a culture that was radically not Anglo-Saxon in its basics and therefore a cultural environment from which one was excluded, mechanically reduced the impetus to create and both writing and painting faltered.

So much for rational explanations.

Suffice it to say I am indebted to the Singapore National Arts Council for the invitation to the Singapore Writers Festival 2009 and for the offer to assist in the publication of this book and to Edwin for agreeing to do an introduction – it means a great deal to me.

This book would not have seen form, however, without the unstinting retyping and proof reading of the entire manuscript by my wife, Ivy, and acknowledgements and thanks are lovingly given.

Chandran Nair
Paris, December 2009

thai farewell

and when your lecturer arrived
with that basket full of pomelos
the quietness did not leave you.
you sat within laughter in that train
eyes sad and solemn at the funeral
of our short affair of laughing words

in your students' union you smiled
and said of the poems that burnt me
they are hard and do not bleed blood,
there is only venom. in your music room
you sat at the ancient stringed instrument
fingering from the teak of years ancient loss
of love that died, you said, like you

and you, I said, numbed by your softness
what are you? smiling, you only said,
I am when others look into the dark sky.
the others looked and did not understand
why your suddenly bright eyes were wet
sitting in that quietness of bangkok
waiting for the train to draw away
from your softened life this venom wounded
thorn that pricked your skin into blood

portrait of a fish, slowly drowning

caught. the net finally closes.
don't despair. your teeth work on instinct,
gnaw this reticulate captivity.
but then, what use disconsolate freedom?

your turn to feel water close the ears,
the faraway hollowness of seashells,
resist a surging tide grown wild,
its sweep towards possible death

or perhaps the mind's at fault.
all former logic based on false premise
cannot construct a coherent syntax,
there are words that have instincts all their own

perhaps you'll survive this collision,
walk the shores without remembering,
you wrote on water, walked on air
and drowned gasping nights in cold despair

caught. now you know what it means.
what has become of your not caring?
are you now proven human, like the rest
that you consent to drag the bottom
become a corpse?

paper cuts

our two small girls on stone floors
cutting paper are images of another
you, small girl of the paper flowers,
and their tears etch against this copper evening
your smile

in the solitary dark trees are again leaning
on our window and radha wakes wanting her mother
and against the violence of external storms
my images remember, give assurance to her sleep

and I reflect how these images we forged
weld days between hours, sleeping to waking
these images which within the metal
of our lives awoken to your absence to proclaim
love remains

reaching for stones

the desert instinctively draws
the curtain of herself, hides
in shadows while stones break
outer defences

the desert flowers suddenly
becomes immune to winds
transmuting philosophies and dreams
to violence. still voices gestate,
assume form. the desert draws
despair taut across love

earth covered stones lie gentle
across her skies light dies
the desert sleeps dreamless
the room silent where desires
urge cold winds to violence

her mind sleeps within stones
unimpelled by love and philosophies
love falls between time and shadows
as the desert closes light,
diffuses dreams, undoes patterns
dries up rain

unmoving hands reaching for stones

about the author

CHANDRAN NAIR was born in Kerala, South India in 1945 but left for Singapore with his mother at the age of seven. His father, who wrote short stories and novels in Malayalam under the pen name of Njekkad (their ancestral village), had migrated to Singapore in 1947.

Nair was educated at Raffles Institution and the University of Singapore from which he holds a Masters in Science (Marine Biology) and a Diploma in Fisheries (with distinction). He went into publishing on his graduation and later worked as an international civil servant with UNESCO, first in Karachi (1981-1985) and then in Paris (1985-2004). As a United Nations specialist in book development he has travelled widely within Asia, Africa, Europe, the Caribbean and Latin America. He has also been a print and audio-visual journalist as well as a TV script writer.

Inspired by his father, Nair had his first poems published in his school magazine *The Rafflesian* in 1963. His first book of poems, *Once the Horsemen and Other poems* was published in 1972 and was well received as was his second collection *After the Hard Hours, This Rain* (1975). He was founder President of the Society of Singapore Writers from 1976 to 1981.

While in Karachi he participated in stage drama and poetry sessions and also started painting. Since moving to Paris he has continued painting and his writing has been included in a number of anthologies including *Calling of the Kindred* (Cambridge Universities Press, 1993), *Idea to Ideal – 12 Singapore poets on the writing of their poems*, edited by Felix Cheong (Firstfruits, Singapore, 2004), *Expression 185* (Raffles Institution, 2008) and *&Words: Poems Singapore and Beyond* edited by Edwin Thumboo (Ethos Books, Singapore, 2010).

Nair married Ivy Goh Pek Kien in 1973 and they have three daughters.