

Classic Poetry Series

**Keki Daruwalla**  
**- poems -**

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## Keki Daruwalla(1937 -)

Keki Nasserwanji Daruwalla was born in 1937 in Lahore in undivided India. In 1945 his father Prof. N.C. Daruwalla retired from Govt. College Lyallpur (now Shah Faizlabad) and moved to Junagadh as Tutor and Guardian to the Prince. His latest novel *Ancestral Affairs* (Harpercollins, 2015) dwells on Junagadh's disastrous accession to Pakistan in 1947. From Junagadh the family moved to Rampur in UP in 1948, where he first studied in Baqar School and later Raza Inter college. His early education, mostly in sub –standard institutions, was pretty chaotic, especially because the language of instruction kept changing, the last two being Urdu and then Hindi. From 1952 -58 he studied in Government College Ludhiana. He attended a coaching camp run by Lala Amarnath and captained his College Cricket XI.

He picked up his love for English literature and cricket from his father. Daruwalla joined the Indian Police Service (IPS) in 1958. He had two stints in anti dacoity operations in UP and also served in the SSB on the Indi Tibet border for three years 1963-66, where he trekked up to heights of 18,880 feet while crossing the Chorhoti Pass. He joined the Cabinet Secretariat and left R&AW as Special Secretary when he was promoted as Secretary and Chairman JIC (Joint Intelligence Committee) in 1993. He retired in 1995.

After retirement he rode through the entire Himalayas ( including Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim) in 2003. He served as Member National Commission for Minorities (2011-2014) where he visited and enquired into practically every major communal riot. He was awarded the Padma Shri for his writing in 2014. He returned his Sahitya Academy Award in 2015 as a protest against its reluctance to take up the cause of rationalist writers murdered by right wing diehards, and also against intolerance of fringe elements belonging to so called 'cultural' factions.

He was Special Assistant to the Prime Minister in 1979.

Daruwalla was a Colombo Plan scholar at Oxford 1980-81 where he worked on Politics in South Asia. He was also a member of the Commonwealth Observers Group for the Zimbabwe Elections in 1980.

# A Take-Off On A Passing Remark

Tall buildings impress me  
the ones which cut off half the sky.  
I like tall stories, even though false;  
not the half-truth sleeping with the half-lie.  
I want things on a large scale:  
amplitudes, a sense of space and light,  
the great yellow eye of the train  
lighting up the distances of the night.  
Urchins, furred caterpillars, moles  
and fern-beds are all right.  
But I want flowering trees, long  
streamers of moss, flaming parasites.  
But when you ask, still squirrel-young  
short as twilight  
short as a shadow at noon  
why I love you, what can I answer?

[From 'The Glass-Blower: Selected Poems']

Keki Daruwalla

# Al-Azhar Lecture

They are naïve, those who suggest  
that the fortunes of the ruler  
and the ruled go hand in hand.  
Take the plague of 1350,  
which traveled like a caravan  
from China across the Pamirs  
to the caravanserai called Egypt;  
rested here, refilled its water-skins  
and moved on to Europe.  
Twenty thousand died each day in Cairo,  
Mamluk, Emir and fellahin.  
But while the people sprouted buboes  
and the cattle broke out in blains  
and the Nile was scaled with  
dead shoals of silver-bellied fish,  
the Sultan got richer.  
When everyone dies  
who succeeds to property  
but the Sultan who embodies the state?  
Jazziya was another money spinner  
And the plague must have spared  
The non-Muslim - it often does.  
Can we blame the State Treasurer  
If, as he prayed, he asked Allah  
for more plagues and more unbelievers?

[From: The Map-maker]

Keki Daruwalla

# Alexander Crosses The Hellespont

He was a little tentative  
when it came to the East.  
Its ways were quite insidious  
and odd to say the least.

His experience was unhappy:  
His first stop had been Cairo  
where he had gone to drop his card  
and call on the Pharaoh.

They laid a banquet for him  
At the Casino Mariot  
and placed by Pope Shenodah  
who but Judas Iscariot!

The Turks would be more organized  
he fondly hoped - and damn!  
He couldn't cross the Hellespont.  
There was a traffic jam.

He raged and ranted fiercely  
"I must have been a fool  
to try and venture into  
intestinal Istanbul.

When do we get to Asia?"  
Great Alexander probed.  
"When Effendi comes to Turkia  
He comes from Europe to Europe.

You can check with CNN  
Or ask the BBC.  
When you come to Turkey  
You come to EEC."

He remembered Aristotle:  
"Son, at the Turkish Rail  
ask for the Occident Express  
The Occidental Mail."

As he checked into a hotel  
- the Turks call it Oteli -  
he found Thais lodged in Hilton  
while he was in Surmeli.

What really turned his eyes into  
two glowing bits of phosphorous  
was that his friend Hephaestion  
checked into Hotel Bosphorous.

His face turned dark and sullen  
as a cloud's before a storm.  
And though they humoured him he screamed  
&quot;I want Hephaestion!&quot;;

They offered handsome eunuchs,  
whores from the Golden Horn.  
But Alexander kept on saying  
&quot;I want Hephaestion&quot;;.

Thias phoned &quot;I am bored at Hilton,  
And I am quite akeli.&quot;;  
But he said what can I do  
for I am at Surmeli!&quot;;

And Mehmet Ali Pasha,  
a little high on raaki  
asked poor Alexander  
if he was an Iraqi?

Then in the hotel dining room  
dressed in salwar-kameez,  
a man accosted him and said  
&quot;could I have your good name please?

Arrey Janab Sikandar Sahab!  
Myself Assad Durrani.  
Oh what a treat it is to meet  
a fellow Pakistani.&quot;;

Alexander answered darkly

&quot;Thanks very much Janab.  
Tell Porus inshah Allah  
We'll be meeting in Punjab.&quot;

He drove the Persians backwards  
right up to Tarbela.  
He beat them up at Granicus.  
He thrashed them at Arbela.

While he uncorkd the champagne  
and lit the fireworks,  
who should speak but Spoil Sport  
Parmenio, the jerk.  
&quot;Sire, though you thrashed the Persians,  
you never touched a Turk.&quot;

Keki Daruwalla

# Bars

If you want  
a cage, my dear  
you do not have  
to travel far.  
If you want to feel  
hemmed in, you'll be hemmed in.  
Look for scars  
you'll be full of scars.  
Even light can turn  
into a cage.  
The cage of light  
has seven bars.

[From: The Map-maker]

Keki Daruwalla

# Before The Word

Corn is great, on the cob or otherwise,  
but before corn in the ear there was life.  
Fire is holy especially for Zoroastrians,  
but before fire too there was life.  
Before the bowstring and the flint arrow sang,  
there was life.

The word is great,  
yet there was life before the word.  
We can't turn romantic and say  
we were into bird speech or river-roar then,  
into the silence of frost  
or the language of rain.  
But forest speech and swamp speech  
came through easier to us.  
When lightning crashed,  
the cry of the marsh bird was our cry,  
and we flung ourselves to the other branch  
like any other baboon.

As winter whined on windy cliff,  
we shivered with the yellow grass.  
In winter-dark a hundred eyes  
flared yellow in the jungle scrub.  
When seasons changed, blood coursed with sap  
and flowered in meadows. We were at home.  
Nor eyes nor bat cries bothered us.  
What if we didn't know  
a bat assessed reality  
from the ricochet of its cry?

Though there were no words,  
fear had a voice with many echoes.  
Worship was quieter, adoration  
spoke only through the eyes or knees.

What was it like before language dropped like dew,  
covering the scuffed grass of our lives?

Keki Daruwalla

# Fish

The sea came in with her and her curved snout  
and her tin coloured barnacles  
and long threaded rose moles  
patterned on her body.

The sea brought her and her curved snout  
and her rose moles and her eyes still translucent  
as if half aware and half unaware  
of the state of her body.

The sea came in with her and her scimitar snout  
and her translucent eyes  
greying into stone.

The sea brought her in,  
wrapped in seaweed  
and slapped her on the sand,  
all five feet of her  
with the armour of her scales  
and the filigree of her rose moles.

The tide kept coming in  
but couldn't disturb her  
or her resting place -  
she was heavy.

The sea fell back but even  
as the thin-edged foam line receded,  
it went to her once more with a supreme effort,  
rummaged among her barnacles  
and left.

Keki Daruwalla

# Map-Maker

Perhaps I'll wake up on some alien shore  
In the shimmer of an aluminium dawn,  
to find the sea talking to itself  
and rummaging among the lines I've drawn;  
looking for something, a voyager perhaps,  
gnarled as a thorn tree in whose loving hands,  
these map lines of mine, somnambulant,  
will wake and pulse and turn to shoreline, sand.

The spyglass will alight on features I've forecast -  
cape, promontory - he'll feel he's been here,  
that voyaging unlocks the doorways of the past.

And deep in the night, in the clarity of dream,  
The seafarer will garner his rewards,  
raking in his islands like pebbles from a stream.

2

Does the world need maps, where sign and symbol,  
standing as proxies, get worked into scrolls?  
You see them, mountain chains with rain gods in their armpits  
and glaciers locked like glass-slivers in their folds.  
Desert, scrub, pasture - do they need shading?  
They're all there for the eye to apprehend.  
A family of cactus and camelthorn tells you  
where one begins and the other ends.

These questions confound me, I'd rather paint  
for a while - a ship on the skyline,  
or cloud-shadow moving like a spreading stain.  
Yet they live, pencil strokes that speak for rain  
and thunder; and die - maplines ghosting round  
a cycloned island that has gone under.

3

Forget markings, forget landfall and sea.  
Go easy Man, I tell myself; breathe.  
Gulls will mark the estuary for you,  
bubbles will indicate where the swamps seethe.  
Map the wrinkles on the ageing skin of love.  
Forget Eastings, Northings - they stand for order.  
Cry, if you must, over that locust line  
flayed open into a barbarized border.

Mark a poem that hasn't broken forth, map the undefined,  
the swamp within, the hedge between love and hate.  
Forget the coastal casuarinas line.

Reefs one can handle. It's lust that seeks  
out its quarry that one cannot map, nor that  
heaving salt of desire that floods the creeks.

4

If you map the future, while a millennium  
moves on its hinges, you may find  
the present turned into an anachronism.  
This too is important - what is yours and mine,  
The silk of these shared moments. But having stuck  
to love and poetry, heeding the voice of reason;  
and experiencing the different textures of  
a season of love and love's eternal season,

I put a clamp on yearning, shun latitudes, renounce form.  
And turn my eye to the far kingdom  
of bloodless Kalinga battling with a storm.  
Dampen your fires, turn from lighthouse, spire, steeple.  
Forget maps and voyaging, study instead  
the parched earth horoscope of a brown people.

[From: The Map-maker]

Keki Daruwalla

# Migrations

Migrations are always difficult:  
ask any drought,  
any plague;  
ask the year 1947.  
Ask the chronicles themselves:  
if there had been no migrations  
would there have been enough  
history to munch on?

Going back in time is also tough.  
Ask anyone back-trekking to Sargodha  
or Jhelum or Mianwali and they'll tell you.  
New faces among old brick;  
politeness, sentiment,  
dripping from the lips of strangers.  
This is still your house, Sir.

And if you meditate on time  
that is no longer time -  
(the past is frozen, it is stone,  
that which doesn't move  
and pulsate is not time) -  
if you meditate on that scrap of time,  
the mood turns pensive  
like the monsoons  
gathering in the skies  
but not breaking.

Mother used to ask, don't you remember my mother?  
You'd be in the kitchen all the time  
and run with the fries she ladled out,  
still sizzling on the plate.  
Don't you remember her at all?  
Mother's fallen face  
would fall further  
at my impassivity.  
Now my dreams ask me  
If I remember my mother  
And I am not sure how I'll handle that.

Migrating across years is also difficult.

[From: The Map-maker]

Keki Daruwalla

# Notes From The Underground

The wind is cold and the wind burns.  
The wind is cold and the wind is acid.  
On the Bar counter ice and amber swirl  
in thick gleaming glasses;  
in the Bar the ash of small talk,  
the smoke of ruminations.  
Light purrs on a bare shoulder,  
her feet are hidden  
in the drooping hem of her sari;  
ice and amber swirling  
I sit here between between,  
to the left of voices  
to the right of memory.  
Thought floats into  
the slow silence of air currents;  
the hours squat with me  
as I snap connections  
in autumn leaf detachment.

2

Nowhere to say this  
no one to say this to  
except to the typewriter  
(the computer would store it  
in its chip-memory  
and that could be embarrassing)  
as she pulled out  
he turned into a dead crab beach  
when the sea pulls out

3

Were the sea to pull out  
sea birds would pull out  
and the breeze;  
shells would turn brittle  
under crackling boot;  
fish and fishermen

would be sucked into the great ebb  
and our traders  
would turn the white sea bed  
into 'The Salt Crystal  
Shopping Arcade',  
selling grounded oil tankers,  
ocean liners dredged out of the mud  
and whales flaked in salt.  
You could buy goldfish though  
as they circle the belly of a water jar.

4

You didn't come with me  
to the mountains this time,  
but as you know  
when you climb mountains  
the stars get nearer;  
don't ask me why this happens  
or how this happens  
but it happens -  
when constellations smile  
death drops your catch.  
but often the stars  
go about their office routine  
in the night sky  
like glum bureaucrats -  
this astral bureaucracy  
is even more baffling in its ways  
than our central ministries.  
In auto mode Rahu gets into the act;  
So does the moon debris that swirls  
around Saturn and forms its rings.  
Then what has to happen, happens.  
That's what happened to you.

5

The almond tree flowers white;  
beside it the peach flowers, as only peach can  
with its own interpretation of pink;  
and further in the lofty rear,

winter has left its brown imprint  
on mountain and crag.  
Perhaps with the rains  
green may return to the slopes,  
a little moss here, a little grass there;  
you never know though,  
the rains may never come  
or life may run out before the rains -  
the almond blossom, each petal soft as an eyelid,  
will also not see the rain.  
They are divided by a scimitar:  
parched landscapes and rain,  
parched lips and love.

6

Watching the wind-ruffled  
down on bird-breast  
I think for no particular reason  
of wind through quivering paddy  
in the Nepal terai.

7

I think I am at peace now,  
he said, for my dreams  
move like the thinnest  
veil of mist over water.  
Awareness of absences,  
of what is right with me  
or wrong with me is also like  
the perception of a veil of mist  
over a perception of water.

My troubles start  
when I think of hope,  
that thin smoke of mist  
over the iron-grey waters of dawn,  
icy waters, he said.

But you are with me always  
like a spring of

underground water  
like the murmur of a spring  
of underground water.

I didn't for the life of me know  
whether he was addressing poetry  
(he had lost his touch lately)  
or his beloved.

Forty years with you  
and I am a better man,  
he said, awash  
in forty years of cleansing waters  
and forty years of light.  
The trouble was  
She couldn't hear him.

Keki Daruwalla

# Sappho To Aphrodite

Long and lonely are my nights.  
Come help me Goddess, end my blight;  
her absence burns me, burns my sides  
with love intense.

Aphrodite, hail or sleet,  
I implore you to come down from Crete;  
my altar smokes, awaits your feet,  
with frankincense.

Your love-demented Sappho pleads:  
Give me no manna and no mead.  
It's love, not wine that Sappho needs  
you understand.

I haven't had a word from her!  
Once again make her my lover  
in bed and bower her breasts should flower,  
in my hands.

Her star-erasing beauty's spell,  
turns me feverish, frail, unwell.  
Her presence is both bliss and hell -  
I tremble so.

Her absence scars my empty flank.  
Goddess you don't need my verse  
to tell you this. My love is frank,  
I can't dissemble so.

Bring back Gongyla to my side!  
May she once more become my bride!  
May she, her lyre and her fire  
beside me purr.

Come foam-born and Cyprus-born,  
Goddess of love and the lovelorn,  
my altar awaits you with fire-urn,  
incense and myrrh.

Keki Daruwalla

# Suddenly The Tree

The hive slept like Argus  
its thousand eyes covered with bees.  
The light as it fell through the neem tree  
was a marine light, in which  
yellow moths set sail  
from one perforated shadow to another.  
The hive was mystic,  
a drugged mantra  
with its dark syllables asleep.  
As the afternoon wore on  
the honey-thieves came  
and smoked the bees out  
and carved out a honey-laden  
crescent for themselves  
and left a lump of pocked wax behind.  
The bees roamed the house,  
too bewildered to sting the children.  
At night they slept, clinging  
to the tree fork, now scarred with burns.  
Sparrows and squirrels, a bird  
with a black crest and a red half-moon  
for an eyelid bickered over  
the waxed remains the next day.  
Then with a drone of straining engines  
the bees rose like a swarm of passions  
from a dying heart, and left.

[From 'The Glass-Blower: Selected Poems']

Keki Daruwalla

# The Poseidonians

(After Cavafy)

[We behave like] the Poseidonians in the Tyrrhenian Gulf, who although of Greek origin, became barbarized as Tyrrhenians or Romans and changed their speech and the customs of their ancestors. But they observe one Greek festival even to this day; during this they gather together and call up from memory their ancient names and customs, and then lamenting loudly to each other and weeping, they go away.

Athenios, Deipnosophistai, Book 14, 31A [632]

All it takes to blight a language  
is another sun. It's not burn  
that does it, or chill, or the way  
woods straggle down the hills, or seas  
curl along the shingled coast.  
It is the women, cowering  
in fear, whom the soldiers,  
as they clamber down the boats,  
first reassure and then marry.

They are faithful, good with grain,  
at baking bread and fermenting wine  
and unscrambling the fish shoals from the meshes.  
They get the goddesses wrong sometimes [but so what?]  
Confusing mother with daughter.  
And there are minor errors  
In ritual and sacrifice,  
In lustration oils and libations.

A few seasons teach the man  
that his woman's omen birds are always right;  
her fears travel down the bloodstream  
and a new language emerges from the placenta.

What does one do with a thought  
that embarks on one script and lands on another?  
A hundred years go by, perhaps two hundred,  
Living with the Tyrrhenians and the Etruscans,  
and they discover there is more to language  
than merely words, that every act  
from making wine to making love  
filters through a different prism of sound,  
and they have forgotten the land they set sail from  
and the syllables that seeded that land.

What do they do, except once a year  
At a lyre-and-lute festival,  
Greek to the core, with dance and contests,  
grope for memories in the blood,  
like Demeter, torch in hand,  
looking for her netherworld daughter?  
And weep a little for the Greece they have lost  
and reflect on the gulf of years which has proved  
wider than the Tyrrhenian gulf,  
and the hiatus between languages,  
wider than the Aegean ?  
What can they do, but weep for Agora  
and Acropolis, forever left behind;  
and reflect, how three centuries distant  
from the Ionian coast,  
they have been barbarized by Rome?

[From: A Summer of Tigers]

Keki Daruwalla

# Underwater Notes

(On revisiting a dream)

I am alone in the house.

It is warm

but I feel cold.

The doors swing open across the years.

For someone who has no ancestral home,

who doesn't have

the long shadow of the past

to ruffle his hair,

homecoming gets distorted.

Time squints, space wobbles

and the visit, encoded as it is,

remains undeciphered.

2

It is cold,

the windows are frost-smudged.

Counsel yourself, there's no one

else to do it.

Let hieroglyphs

remain dented where they are.

Let wind erode them, or time -

they are warp and weft of all erosion.

Come out of the house and write

(not hieroglyphs this time!)

It is cold.

Frost has smudged the windows.

Your hair is grey as hoarfrost.

3

A rundown house,

is a desolation.

A rundown house

perched on a live memory,

with me alone conversing with both  
is a double desolation.  
Twenty years ago when I took a look around  
It wasn't there.  
Someone now tells me at a reunion  
the house is standing,  
only new streets  
interlock around it.  
It's still there! That's nice,  
one desolation gets sloughed off  
.

4

It's only when reality slips by  
like a sliding panel  
that you realize  
that the marvellous in the everyday real  
has passed you by.

5

Seated on the hull of your boat  
you lurch and tilt.  
The horizon is the forest,  
darkening leaf on darkening sky.

Slot your time properly  
in the right caves.  
The sea is the present  
The forest is the future.

Speech is present tense  
Echo is the future.

If you are talking of echoes  
you are talking of walls.  
If you talk of water echo  
you are discussing womb walls -  
odd territory,

come out of it.  
Unsure on land  
    you take to the sea.  
The skyline is a forest  
Fern-dark, shadow-dark  
graveled with white coral grit.

6

Whatever evil he suffered, he forgot  
said Milosz in one of his poems.  
Now that's a scrap of myth, isn't it?  
And it is one thing to forgive  
and another to forget.  
I tried to put things behind me,  
in the backyards of memory-clutter,  
and went back to my flirtations with altitudes,  
touched the Karakorams at Siachen,  
touched - Hindi has such a lovely word for it, 'sparsh' -  
Nubra, the garden of the North  
and slept in a tent at Tsomoriri -  
the rocks brown, the lake blue;  
I got hold of a scrap of a myth here  
(at 15000 feet it's a good scrap to grab).  
It was very hot, and a woman called Tsomo  
riding a yak couldn't rein him in,  
as the yak made straight for the lake.  
She kept shouting 'riri, riri', 'stop, stop' in Tibetan,  
but the yak went in and they both drowned.

7

The stars have flung  
their net into the sea  
Among the thrashing fish shoal  
and the lassoed crab  
look for me.

Keki Daruwalla

# Wolf

Fire-lit  
half silhouette and half myth  
the wolf circles my past  
treading the leaves into a bed  
till he sleeps, black snout  
on extended paws.  
Black snout on sulphur body  
he nudged his way  
into my consciousness.  
Prowler, wind-sniffer, throat-catcher,  
his cries drew a ring  
around my night;  
a child's night is a village  
on the forest edge.  
My mother said  
his ears stand up  
at the fall of dew  
he can sense a shadow  
move across a hedge  
on a dark night;  
he can sniff out  
your approaching dreams;  
there is nothing  
that won't be lit up  
by the dark torch of his eyes.  
The wolves have been slaughtered now.  
A hedge of smoking gun-barrels  
rings my daughter's dreams.

[From 'The Glass-Blower: Selected Poems']

Keki Daruwalla