

FRANCIS

I, Francis of Assisi,
I open with the leaves,
I spread with the roots,
I am the flowers' fragrance
and I, the fruits' sweetness.
Earth is my courtyard.
Mountain, my granddad,
carried me on his back.
Rain, my grandma,
covered me in her coolness.
Forest is my mother.
She gave me food and shade.
Wind is my father.
He rode me round the world.
Moon's cool dreams lulled me;
Sun's warm hands roused me.
Clouds and doves
roost on my shoulders.
Wolf-cubs and sea-waves
leap up on my lap.
I tame the roaring tempest
stroking his mane.
The untamable deluge
kneels in front of me
so that I mount and ride her.
The barking wild fire
retreats when I sigh,
his tail between his legs.
Brother Lightning downs
his silvery hood at my sight
to retreat into his hole.
Sister Water comes running at my call
shaking her neck-bells.
My fingers cool
the power-monger's haughty brow
and the avenger's boiling blood.

I, Francis of Assisi.
I am the dumb's word,
and the blind's eye .
I am the worm's hoof
and the ant's wing.
I love; therefore I exist.
Guns rain bread for the hungry
as I kiss their triggers.

The slave's cross is mine;
the toiler's sweat is mine,
Mine is death in prison and mine,
martyrdom in the battlefield.

You will come to me
when your armories are empty
and your seven seas
fill with human blood.
We will build the new Jerusalem,
one brick for each slain man,
one brick for each butchered beast,
one brick for each felled tree.
We will bind them with tears.
We will fly to other planets
on the wings of birds
with cornstalks and olive leaves.

1989

(Translated from Malayalam by the poet)

GALILEE

His house was in a valley
teeming with violets.
Clouds blushed at the sound of his neck-bells.

He grew tall fast in the rain's lullaby
like some of those wild trees.
Even before the smell of
mother's milk had left him,
he found before him
a rope, a knife, a hook.
The mouth was stuffed, like on the gallows:
his weeping should not disturb God.

I could not stand the blue sky in his eyes,
and the dance that lay choked on his hooves.

When they pulled the rope,
he heard a flute.
He stretched his neck as if to his mother's udders.
They laid it on the clod stone.
We closed our eyes.
Heaven's blindness enveloped us.

I saw within his bleeding head:
A sunlit green turf, on it
a herd of white sheep like a cluster of stars,
a lean half-naked youth in long hairs
in the middle of the herd.

Five wounds,
on his body.

2004

(Translated from Malayalam by the poet)

PIETA

How much did I try
not to scream when
they were driving nails
into my hands and feet!
I shouldn't have donned
this prophet's robe. I
would've found my God
in the carpenter's job. I never
wanted to say or do anything
you wouldn't understand.
How many times did I pray
to him to take back this cup!
When I said 'they don't know
what they are doing' it was
about people calling me God.
Had I been God, would
the injustice in the world of men
have burnt my heart? Only
you know the secret of
my birth, my suffering,
my indignation. The fragrance
of your breasts tempts me again ,
the one that had lured me when
I was a baby in your lap.
Ask bells and leaves to cover
us. Ask the sun not to rise. I don't
want to rise again. This will do
for me: this salt of your tears
healing my wounds, this earth's
evenings moist with
sweat and affection.

(Translated from Malayalam by the poet)

SAMSON

I found lions easy to kill,
like hares; I turned foxes
into torches and set fire
to the enemy's crops.

I pulled down the city gates,
placing them on the mountaintop,
like a cyclone. I stood above
the hills of corpses and
laughed like an enraged fool.

But Milha, Dalilah,
the hanging gardens of your eyes,
the symphonies of your fingers,
the wine-jars of your breasts,
the festivals of your waists,
the swallows of your feet:
it was a man's senses that
made me prisoner.

The philistines buried my god
in the night of unfaith.
They gave me two dark graveyards
in place of my bright eyes.
The hymns sung for the enemy's gods
pounce like leopards
upon the fallen seeds of my hairs.

O, slaves of Israel,
o, prophets silenced,
that evil goddess who blinds the powerful
and weakens those who see
is governing us still.

Dalilah, what I had once told you
is wrong: the secret of power
is not in the hairs, but
in the part they guard.

The time of heroes is past.
They have been condemned to live
with their swollen muscles
in children's comics.

From today I refuse
to play the hero.

1983

**SINS: THE ROMAN SEQUENCE
(Excerpts)**

THE FALL OF POETRY

Once upon a time
poetry lived on Mount Parnassus.
Apollo sat in the shade of his
olive tree playing his lyre.
The Muse of Poetry
with her full breasts
and golden magic wand
sat by, flirting and teasing.
Homer, Virgil and Dante sat
next to them, discussing the sublime.
The sky was so close
poetry could touch the rainbow.
The sacred larks of heaven
sang among the silver- clouds.
Gods peeped out of poetry
brushing aside the boughs of
written trees under
the written moon.
Immortality lay cuddled
in each letter.
Every object
that reached those heights

became still, permanent.
Apollo pushed down to Hell those
who broke the golden rules of poetry.
Everything was rich, refined,
decent and civilized:
lamb for dinner,
six hours of quiet sleep,
wine in a goblet of jade on waking,
heavenly honey to dip
the golden plume to pen the notes.

It was much later that
Satan pulled poetry down to earth.
Now she wandered among
the beggars in India in
unkempt hair and soiled rags,
worked the loom with Kabir,
turned the potter's wheel with Gora,
took poison with Meera,
starved with Ezhuthacchan*
Now she peeps out from pages
written in common ink
to see earth, just our transient earth.

(On watching Raphael's 'Parnassus' at St. Peter's)

THE LAST JUDGEMENT

One day the dead will wake up
to the pipes of angels,
ascend to the sky to await
the Last Judgement.
The confessor and the confessed,
the persecutor and the persecuted,
the woodcutter and the wood
will all stand in the same queue.
Every muscle will recount its sins;
the eye, the ear and the tongue

will stand witness.
There will be none to stop the sinners
from throwing stones, for
he who had been judged
also will have become judge.
The sinners will be branded
and driven to Hell; but
Hell will not have an inch of space.
They will go on waiting.
That is Eternity.
The holy will be led to Heaven; but
Heaven will have lost its keys.
That is Immortality.

(On watching Michelangelo's 'Last Judgement', St. Peter's)

NERO'S SOLILOQUY

You fault me with playing the lyre
while Rome was burning;
but it was you who had set fire to Rome.
The fire wouldn't have gone out
even if I hadn't played and it spread
not cause I played.
I'm a sensitive artist.
I can't stand the scream
of men and women on fire,
can't see the genius
of the sculptors and architects
reduced to rubble.
I don't want to hear
the howls of Romulus,
the heads of plebeian heroes
grind their teeth from the points of spears.
Nor the cry of the bones
of Jesus' disciples eaten away by
crosses and lions,
the gurgle of blood from

Pompey's headless corpse,
the groan of the commoners
crushed under Caesar's throne,
the last sigh from Mark Antony's body
that had once turned on Cleopatra,
Octavian's war-drums,
The ceaseless clanging
Of the chains of the slave armies
that had fought and fallen
from Greece and Gaul
to the Isles of the Mediterranean
and Macedonia
for somebody's imperial ambitions.
I fear my own shadow.
I can't stand cruelty except my own.
I am the lyric poet,
my lyre my only refuge.
Please don't wrest this from me.
This city is burning like any other,
in the fire of its own sins.
Let it burn and let me play.

(At the Imperial Forums)

1999

(Translated from the Malayalam by the poet)

THAT STONE*

I too pick up a stone
"Murderers!",
I raise it to my lips,
"Kill them! ",
I raise it above my head.

"Let the man who has not sinned

pelt the first stone!"
-who is this bearded man?

The stone comes down
and falls on my own head;
my blood mingles with
the sacred blood from the cross,
" Kill me too! ", I, the sinner,
stand naked with the murderers.

2013

*Written in the context of the gang rape in Delhi and its responses

(Translated from Malayalam by the poet)

THE END OF THE WORLD

On the seventh day God woke up from his repose disturbed by nightmares. He commanded: 'Let Paradise return to the primal waters.' And paradise melted, vanishing like an iceberg from fables, mythologies and the dreams of the poor. Only stagnant water remained where Paradise used to be.

'Let all that is green vanish'. Forests crumbled screaming, crushing the grass. Even parrots abandoned maize fields. Palms could no more shelter the crows.

Squirrels ceased to dream of mango blooms. The dried-up trees bore only perennial ice. Man's axe obstructed rain. The grand orchestra of the waterfalls fell to silence. The skin of the paddy fields wore wrinkles. Rivers slid back into earth. The chariot of seasons got stuck in sand.

That was the sixth day.

'Let all the beasts that walk, run or crawl perish'. Rains disappeared. The hot sky and the hunters' guns went about their work. The last fawn stood watching the last fawn rush with unbearable thirst to the dry stream. Elephants stood, tear-drenched trunks raised to greet the end, absorbed in racial memories Grasshoppers and butterflies, denied the taste of leaves and pollen, shed their wings to cover the last zebras. The last calf collapsed, its mouth still glued to its mother's udder.

That was the fifth day.

‘Let those that swim and those that fly be no more’. Whales floated bellies upwards like mountain-peaks in the sea-water poisoned by tests. Sharks and shrimps lay staring alike at the unkind sky. The nymphs and demons of the sea forgot their feud and, sobbing, hugged one another. The doves of peace breathed gas and flew to eternity. Cuckoos and nightingales ended their concert to go behind the curtains. Peacocks dissolved into colours clouds could no more tempt.

That was the fourth day.

‘Let all the beautiful things made by man disappear’. Machines multiplied. Robots walked the streets with sword and fire. Buddhist monasteries, folk-songs, Vikramaditya tales, the Old Testament, classical music, Micaelangelo’s David, Versaille palace, Sistine chapel, Persian carpets, Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, Belur temple, *Hamlet*, Lorca’s poetry ... all came to dust. The Sphinx stood watching the death of beauty until she jumped into the fire as if her riddle had been solved.

Thus the third day too came to an end.

‘Let the human race whose creation I repent cease’. The nuclear arsenals built up with care by the farsighted burst into an explosion knowing their time had come. Germs, poison gas and death-rays rose into air from underground laboratories. Children’s toy whistles and gypsy songs dissolved in the roar of fighter planes and interplanetary missiles. Pregnant women prematurely delivered still-born. Mothers’ milk got mixed with the blood of volcanoes. A handful of ashes floated in the air where the earth used to be.

That was the end of the second day.

‘Let there be darkness’, commanded God unable to look at the lifeless sea of light before Him. Even the last drop of sunlight dried up on the horizon. Stars went out one by one. Moons hung down black like the crumbs of the poor. The colour of nothingness pervaded the universe.

So ended the first day.

Now the days had come to an end. God now wept, alone, hiding His face in the cosmic nothingness at the end of space and time.

‘Let there be light’, he cried.

There was no light.

(Translated from the Malayalam by E. V. Ramakrishnan and the poet)

THE PRODIGAL SON

I went out into the world
a festival, with flags and friends.

I came back alone, a coffin.
They took away my garment of
daylight and wheat stalks
and gave me a robe of night.

They replaced my God's egg
in the cuckoo's nest with Satan's.
I broke into pieces like a mirror,
each riding a cloud of wine.

I came back when the hunger
of the pigsty tore at me
mewing like a cat. I bear the seal
of the butcher on my brow.

I lodge in my heart
the snow-plant of grief.

I have come, tired and purified,
A hymn from the sore-stricken
cows of suffering, from whose houses
fuming like myrrh and highroads
cobbed with the marble stones of sin.

But he who has been out in the world
finds no peace at home.
I am a tombstone now, spiritless, dead.
My song of rejoicing lies
entangled in these walls, like a lamb
in the thorns of the desert.
Winds, swans, harvests and dances have
fallen off my steps.

I fly from word to word restless
like a bird, its nest burnt out.
I hover around the dried-up springs

of the Arabian Nights
and the broken casements of
moonlit Babylon.

Yesterday a woman placed
a rose over my chest,
as if I were dead.
I will not dwell in this den,
to be flung back to the sea
like the specter of the fisherman's tale
going back into its jar.
Outside are the drizzle's chirping swallows,
little children lisp on the swing
unaware of Babel's fall,
mothers, their full-breast
like sunlit balconies
and hips that part in joy
to lead babies into light
and a seed that slipped
from the rock into the field.

Better be a hot wind on the date palms
of the Sahara than to live here
as a parable of the scriptures
sneered at by neighbours.

Farewell, I am going.
This house is a blind beast.

1983

THE PROPHET

(At Dostoevsky's home in St Petersburg)

Fyodor, this was your last hell.
I can see you sit in this dim-lit room
meditating on man's destiny on earth.
A lean and handsome Jesus
stands behind your chair
listening to the lively music
your pen plays on paper.
He watches Ivan Karamazov dancing
in the fire between faith and doubt
on your fingertips life has burnt.
The immortal blood of his sacrifice
mingles with your untamable mortal blood.

Fyodor,
You kept flying between coffin-like rooms
and cemetery-like corridors
as if haunted by a ghost.
You saw the poor crushed everywhere by walls:
walls, fences, alleys, narrow courtyards, low roofs..
You feared even the sky would descend
and trees would close you in like prison-bars.
Unpaid debts and headless phantoms
never left you in peace.

Fyodor,
I saw the prison-cell at Semyanov square
where for four years you awaited death.
I could see you pulling carts loaded with stones
and waiting blind-folded for the bullets.
You recognized your life's mission
the moment you were called back to life.
Those rays from beyond the sun that fell on you then:
were they from God or from Satan?

What drowned you in the end
were not bullets, Fyodor, but

the whirlwinds of your own nerves,
the high tides of your own veins,
the infernal proliferation of voices and images.
Or, weren't you yourself Alyosha, Mithya,
Ivan and Raskolnikov? Weren't you
Arcady, Verkhovensky, Petrovich,
Stavrogin, Devushkin...(1)
the sinner and the saint,
the drunkard and the prophet,
the lover and the rebel?

You always walked along the razor's edge.
In sleepless nights, seated between
the departing friend and the dying beloved,
between the last cry of your darling daughter
and the farewell poem of your dearest friend, (2)
you heard the sacred words of the prophets
break like collar bones under the train's steel
and the dying screams of the human souls
caught on the teeth of machines, bleeding.
You groped for a way to save love as if it were
a baby to be retrieved from the hound's sharp teeth.
And you resigned like a recluse finding
it was not love but hatred that united men.

It was death who gambled with you,
death, who sat staring at you,
grinding his teeth.

Your dream was blue.
Blue was the death that choked you,
blue, the water that drowned you,
blue, the fire that burnt you,
blue heaven, blue Jesus,
here, between us,
unable to cross, to reach each other.

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(1.) Dostoevsky's fictional characters (2.) Maria, his wife; Mikhail, brother, Sofia, daughter
and Apollon Gregoriev, friend.

(Translated from the Malayalam by the poet)

THE SHROUD OF JESUS

The Peasants and fishermen of Jerusalem have
a story to tell about the mysterious shroud of Jesus:

They had just lowered him from the cross when
a ploughman from a maize-field in the valley
came running, his legs coated with mud.

A carpenter who made crosses and coffins
for priests and kings also came.

Over the bleeding body of the savior, they spread
a piece of silk they had bought for a month's wages,
until sweat and blood and tears together
deeply impressed on it his shape.

Then showing their calloused hands to gain
their trust, they addresses the poor around :
“We will preserve this shroud for all time.

Let posterity learn that death
on the cross is the only reward
for those who try to change the heart of the masters
instead of teaching the slaving toilers
to wrench their freedom from the tyrants.”

(1979)

(Translated from Malayalam by the poet)

THE WESTERN CANTO

Rome, Rain

(To Tasos Denegris)

The rain in Rome springs
from the eyes of the Mother,

her slain son in her lap.
The rain dissolves
the footprints of the Exodus.
The guiding star
is drowned in a deluge.
A crow from the Colosseum
announces the last century of Man.
A bomber screeches above St. Peters.

(St. Peters, Rome, 8 May)

Hymn to Wine

(To Izet Sarajlic)

Wine was in the heart of God.
He poured it down
to create vineyards.

Raise the cup to your lips,
and you are kissing the Earth.
Each droplet sings in the blood,
a lark, as we turn into
the cherry trees of spring.
Our arms flower, breeze whispers
love into our leaves,
our roots press on, past summers,
past hells, past the battle's bones
and the buried dreams,
until they discover that magic spring
whose sacred water unites
all humans on Earth.

Every cup you raise for a neighbour
is a hymn in glass

for him who had turned
water into wine.

(Hotel Central, Sarajevo, 10 May)

The Poet's Statue

(To Husein Tahmiscic)

Which is the substance
solid enough to make the poet's statue?
One's own flesh.
Won't flesh decay?
Posterity awaits at the edge of decrepitude;
it will rebuild it in its own image.

Who is the sculptor
skilled enough to make the poet's statue?
One's own time.
Won't time change?
Each coming age will mould it anew
in the fire of its awakening.

What is the form of the poet's statue?
The form of water.
Isn't water formless?
Water takes the form it is given:
pitcher, puddle, cloud,
rain, river, sea.

What is the colour of the poet's statue?
The colour of nothingness.
Isn't nothingness colourless?
It's bright in daylight, black at night,
blue in heights and depths.
It's sexless, so it knows
the joys of man and woman.
Its taste keeps changing:
salty in sweat, bitter in wine,
sweet in fruit, sight in the eye.
It has no feelings: so its own,
all pleasures and pains.
It is ignorant, so it can hold all wisdom
It has no meaning,

so it can receive all meaning.
Its name is just a sign,
and so is its country.
We may call it whatever we choose.

Aleksa Santic?
Why not?

(In front of the statue of poet Aleksa Santic, Mostar, 11 May)

We Live on Islands
(To Dorota Chroscielewska)

“What use are these flowers? Will their touch
rouse the dead children?
Will the birds’ song break open prisons?”

Dorota, our life is a grey wind
blowing over ruins.
We landed on different islands,
living on our dead brothers, clinging still
to the memories of a ship-wreck.
Our brief day is a bird’s tail on fire.
It is death that weaves dawn’s silk here,
fattening itself on the night’s leaves.

We live on islands.

Hear the oceans of blood
heaving inside the graveyards.
Hear the kids from the birds’ throats:
Moso, David, Eather, Jakov:
childhoods choked to death in the gas chambers.
O, how we smuggled in battlesongs
inside lullabies! How we gifted one another
bombers for toys!

We live on islands.

Our kisses explode one another.
The god of the dance sequence
plays the killer in the war scene.
Here blossoms bust out of knee-stumps.
Fear rules all the seasons of our tale.
Tanks roll along the same lane
spring comes along.

We live on islands.

Dorota, our words are ants
that drag in only headless corpses.
Our language is a house on fire.
Music jumped out of it long ago,
burns all over.
Our spring is the sigh of survivors
on the mountain tops,
their prophecies all dried up.
Don't ask me to forget
the blood on our hands.
These carnations are no excuse:
they were all once the victims' eyes.

Dorota, these flowers are for
our own hearts, long ago dead.

(At the War Memorial, Mostar, 12 May)

The Birth of Rivers

(To David Harsent)

This is how rivers are born:
One day the hill's body aches and splits,
a spring leaps out like a meteor.
With him the buried cities come back:
the gigantic loves of dinosaurs, felled trees of old,
tribal goddesses, Adam and Eve,
the lost Paradise, the denied light,
God's remembrance of the earlier universe.

The children dancing around him
have discovered the secret of creation
between a rock and a beech tree.

And the Wise, they filter the water for gold:
a new solar system in the mould,
a new spring, new Christ, once again for us,
to crucify.

(At the Bosnian Spring, 14 May)

Frankfurt

(To John Kendrick)

Mephisto is now a machine
that grants any wish.
Press a button, and Helen arrives
for Faust, straight from B C E.
Policemen with stenguns
hum the Ninth symphony.

(Frankfurt, 16 May)

1987