

# The Strange Affair of Robin S. Ngangom

--- Robin S. Ngangom

Not once can I say  
I am the captain  
behind this wheel of fire.  
I remember misplacing  
a bronze bell  
somewhere, sometime.  
I left behind many untended hearths.  
Rushing back I discovered  
something had changed me.  
I can say  
I am this or that,  
that I envied the character  
of water and stone.  
that I envied the character  
of water and stone.  
As a boy I was made a sheep,  
now I am enchanted into a goat  
that the townspeople  
enjoy driving to the square

with a marigold garland  
between my horns.  
At twenty-four  
I invited myself to Bohemia.  
The kingdom of Art,  
where people never grow old,  
was my affable neighbour.  
Moved by curiosity,  
I found myself lingering  
at backstages, where painted girls  
and poor blind boys  
came to do their parts.  
In the evenings now,  
I often mix my drink with despair.  
Love, of course, made me entirely useless.  
This is the story of my people.  
We sowed suspicion in the fields.  
Hatred sprang and razed the crops.  
Now they go to gloating (glorying) neighbours,  
begging bowls in hand,  
fingers pointed at each other.  
Their incessant bickering (backbiting)

Muffles (quiets) all pity.  
Our intentions are clear.  
Slash (Tear) and burn,  
let fire erase all traces,  
so that suspicion cannot write  
our murderous history.  
Somewhere inside the labyrinth  
we met, locked horns, and  
went our feuding ways.  
Our past, we believe, is pristine  
even as we reaped heads and took slaves.  
When we re-write make-believe history  
with malicious intent,  
memory burns on a short fuse.  
As boys return to Christmas,  
escorted by hate and fear,  
they take a circuitous route  
to outwit an enemy  
who will revel too much in the birth  
of a merciful son. When these boys  
reach home, their dreams will come  
dressed in red.

II

Hands filled with love,

I touched your healing breasts.

Like the beaten-up past

scars appeared on your body.

I ask, who branded the moonskin of my love?

Who used you like a toy doll?

And my hands returned to me

stigmatised with guilt.

When I turn with a heavy heart

towards my flaming country,

the hills, woman, scream your name.

Soldiers with black scarves (mufflers)

like mime artists

turn them in seconds into shrouds.

For the trucks carrying

the appliances of death and devastation,

for the eager rescuer in his armoured car,

for the first visitor to the fabled homeland,

the graves of youths who died in turmoil

are the only milestones to the city.

But the hills lie draped (dressed) in mist.  
Instead of the musk of your being  
I inhale the acrid smoke  
of gelignite (explosive) and pyres.  
With cargoes of sand and mortar  
Mammon came to inspect the city.  
He cut down the remaining trees  
and carried them away  
like cadavers (corpses) for dissection.  
Morning papers like watered-down milk  
sell the same bland items:  
rape, extortion, ambushes (traps), confessions,  
embezzlement, vendetta (campaign), sales,  
marriages, the usual.  
There is talk on the streets,  
in dark comers, in homes, words  
caught by the ears of a restaurant.  
We honour the unvarying certainty,  
and pay routine homage to silence.  
Everyone has correctly identified  
the enemy of the people.  
He wears a new face each morning,

and freedom is asking yourself  
if you are free, day after sullen (morose) day.

III

Uprightness is not caressing (touching) anything publicly,

Integrity is not drinking,

Worthiness is contributing generously to a new faith

to buy guns for unleashing (set free) ideological horror,

Service is milking the state

and when you can lift no more

to start burgling each other

so that we can become paragons of thievery,

Chastity is forbidding our women

from exposing their legs,

Purity is not whispering

even a solitary word of love

so that it will not be mistaken

for unpardonable obscenity.

Nothing is certain:

oil

lentils

potatoes

food for babies

transport

the outside world.

Even fire water and air

are slowly becoming commodities.

Patriotism is the need of the hour.

Patriotism is preaching secession

and mourning our merger with a nation,

patriotism is honouring martyrs

who died in confusion,

patriotism is declaring we should

preserve native customs and traditions,

our literature and performing arts,

and inflicting them on hapless peoples,

patriotism is admiring

the youth who fondles grenades,

patriotism is proclaiming all men are brothers

and secretly depriving my brother,

patriotism is playing the music of guns

to the child in the womb.

Stones speak, the hills speak

when we finally fall silent.

History, hunch-backed friend,  
why do we fear you,  
why do we love, hate, lie,  
conceal, merely to enact you  
in the coarse theatre of time?

IV

Today, I stand alone and acknowledge  
the left-handed gift of a man  
without a woman, and  
a tiny land bound by fire.  
Slave to an unexamined life  
all that I've done  
I've accomplished blindfolded:  
love, fear, anger, and old despair.  
The penitent (repentant) year wears sackcloth  
and pours ashen leaves on its head,  
the sky's dress is in shreds.  
When stars appear, they hold up the sky  
like nuts and bolts so that  
the firmament will not fall.  
But we who sleep under these stars

will not let each other dream.

Love is also a forgotten word.

The ability to suffer, and the ability  
to inflict the utmost hurt  
on the person you love most,  
this is how I've known it.

The festival of lights  
happened during childhood.

Today, I'm again with widows  
who cannot light lamps anymore.

Maybe the land is tired.  
of being suckled on blood,  
maybe there is no peace  
between the farmer and his fields,  
maybe all men everywhere  
are tired of being men,  
maybe we have finally acknowledged death.

My love, how can I explain  
that I abominate (hate) laws

When I am gone

I would leave you these:

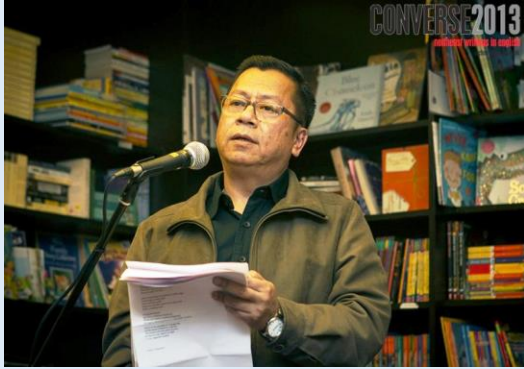
a life without mirrors, and

the blue ode between pines  
between pines and the winter sky.

But where can one run from the homeland,  
where can I flee from your love?

They have become pursuing prisons  
which hold the man  
with criminal words.

# About the poet



Robin Singh Ngangom was born in Imphal, Manipur of North Eastern India. He is a bilingual poet who writes in English and Meiteilon. He studied literature at St Edmund's College and the North Eastern Hill University Shillong, where he teaches. His books of poetry include *Words and the Silence* (1988) published by Writers Workshop, *Time's Crossroads* (1994) and *The Desire of Roots* (2006). His essay, *Poetry in a Time of Terror* appeared in *The Other Side Of Terror: An Anthology Of Writings On Terrorism In South Asia* published by Oxford University Press, New Delhi (2009). He was conferred with the Katha Award for Translation in 1999.[3]