

Thirst was proportionate of course, and I drank
bathfuls of cocoa, tea from the storage tank.
And in the old days, finally, habits were different;
gentle talk resolved people's differences, not argument,
bitter quarrels, a violent punch on a sore head,
armies in uniform, rifles, a nuclear warhead.
Proverbs and tender love songs were everyone's language
and just the right words for an imaginable golden age.
We listened to one another, and sat up straight,
told the truth always, did not exaggerate.

Peter Porter

Home and Hosed

To whom it may concern,
the matter of disposal of my body at my death—

I shall get the jokes over early.
My cat Flora is not likely to outlive me,
otherwise I would will her my feet and guts
and, of course, my genitals,
(about the weight of a small tin of Whiskas),
but we are still within the Unitary State
and may not feed our cats
on the riddling remnants of our lives.

No, consign it to the fire.
Take it to the undenominational ghats
set down drives of sycamores
beyond the golfing suburbs;
there the parsons are all locums,
prayers are culled from instances
of Anglican good taste and Presbyterian surprise,
the wreaths alone baroque
and Bach without belief washes our formal faces.

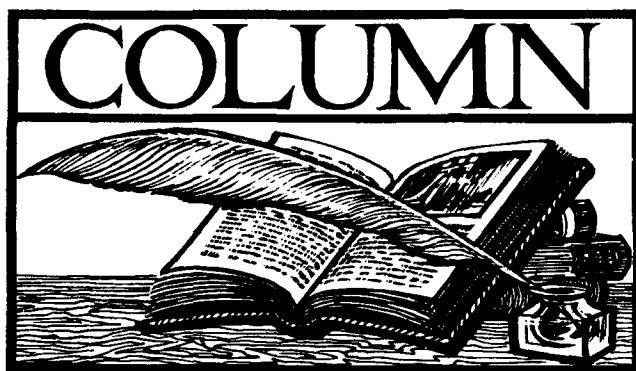
Keep this shell in which I hermited
far from the black and invoice-laden men
who cleanse our world of death.
The priggish Baron who told Mozart's widow
not to waste her cash on coffins
wasn't wrong—"ein schöne Leich"
fits out the Viennese for festival
but Mozart's unmarked resting place
is inspiration to us all. I summon up

the silly cardboard castles and ideal lodges
of Australian undertakers,
their presidencies of Rotary Clubs,
their Sunday programmes of soft music.
Surely the dead are livid at the living.

Hunter and hunted must come home.
Heaven which listened with ears of flesh
still sits insipid in the eaves of time;
Hell the forthright can't hold its own
against the newest movies; only blood,
blocked from tending to far-off oedemas,
races up-river to replete apocalypse.

I have limped far from high seriousness.
Assessors with my card in hand
will raise not a smile: "this flesh you were lent
is due for replacement, but yours is a case
without special merit. You made little sense
with your cries, bent no tonality
out of its rictus; you seem to us like
a sheep on an A road burst through a fence,
all tangle and terror. But, as proprietor
of some of our maker's immaculate filament,
you may call on the guarantee. Love,
great star of the terrified heavens,
shines on your head. It is time, true time
to give back your body. Know that the creek
keeps on flowing, the swallow skins to the wire,
someone is starting to climb up Saddleback."

The soul's straightforwardness is crimped in the fire.



SOME YEARS AGO, as sidekick to a VIP, I toured the atomic installations at Trombay, outside Bombay. Alert, self-confident technicians in white coats, resembling the “scientists” who “tell us” this or that in old-fashioned advertisements, quoted facts and figures and drew diagrams on blackboards. We stepped carefully round a “swimming-pool” reactor. We peered knowledgeably at girders. Then, each wearing a green plastic lapel badge, we were admitted to a reactor chamber. It meant as little to the layman as everything else—as if we’d entered a huge steel football or balloon. We did our Duke of Edinburgh act, nodding, hands clasped behind us, muttering “I see.” On the way out, our green badges were collected. “What for?” I asked the official. “Oh. Oh, well, you see, Sir, we shall test them now for, er, radioactivity.” “How long does that take?” “No more than a week.” His face fell rather when I said that we were flying back to Europe next morning.

I heard no more about it, so you can switch off the Geiger counter. But that scene—and one other—encapsulated for me the paradox that every traveller notes in India, as elsewhere. The second scene embodied it more sharply. That was the sight, outside the immaculate nuclear buildings, of women in mud-splashed saris carrying bricks on their heads, for the construction of a new wing.

Both scenes stirred in my memory at the time of the Bhopal disaster, heightening the fear that it’s perilous to crash-land high technology on terrain apparently ill-prepared for it. But that, it would seem, is precisely what has been happening more and more, faster and faster, since my emblematic afternoon at Trombay.

An unexpected Christmas gift arrived last year from an Indian friend in New Delhi. Square, flat, and heavy, it looked in its wrappings like a box of exotic sweetmeats. In fact, it was a book published two years earlier, but no less relevant today: a “Citizens’ Report by the Centre for Science and Environment in Delhi”, on *The State of India’s Environment 1982*.¹

Anyone at all involved in “Third World” or environmental issues can expect to become inured to turgid prose. Some reports on these subjects are literary battle-courses—designed, it would seem, to stretch the attention-span, toughen one’s tolerance of poisonous jargon, raise the

boredom threshold to unimagined heights. All over the world there seem to be verbiage factories—and verbiage collectors—never content with one abstraction where seven will do. Needless new coinages, in-group acronyms, bureaucratic euphemisms, pseudo-scientific periphrasis, covert political bias: if all that mush were mealie, nobody need starve. As it is, they asked bread and we gave them UNESCO.

The Indian “Citizens’ Report”, with its brown cover, its two-column format, its black-and-white photographs and boxes and statistical tables, looks at first sight like an addition to the mountain of bumph. In fact, it’s a model of brevity and straight talk. Lively, vivid, sensible, alarming, and argumentative, it even offers some fitful rays of hope.

Compiled in a hurry by a group of impatient experts, and edited by three of them, it often has a homely touch.

“We would have liked to check and cross-check every fact and figure but, given the size of the country, it was not always possible to do so. Errors in reporting, and at times even of understanding, are bound to have crept in. We hope the readers will excuse our lapses but, more importantly, that they will take the trouble to point them out to the editors.”

Announcing editions in Hindi and Malayalam, its authors “see the report beginning to reach far beyond the English medium crowd.”

Members of that crowd—I picture them at the race-course or the tennis-club, where *plus ça change, plus c’est la mamsahib*—will find plenty in the book which is new to them. So will Western readers. For me, the revelations fall into three categories. First, there’s the confirmation of India’s long-term, pre-existing plight. Secondly, there’s a mass of evidence to show that economic development, for all its obvious benefits, has exacted a terrible price, some of it clearly avoidable. Thirdly, there are several signs—of which this report is an instance—that Indians themselves are beginning to resist crash programmes, “great leaps forward”, and other ill-considered forms of grandiose ruthlessness which ruin while they enrich.

POVERTY, “BACKWARDNESS”, “under-development”, dirt, disease, and squalor—these, in India, come as no surprise. What may surprise a foreign reader are some of the statistics. Take water: 70% of it is polluted, and water-related diseases are thought to account for the loss of 73 million work-days a year. “Along every kilometre of the Ganga in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal, people and factories are pouring their garbage, excreta and muck into what is gradually turning from river to drain.” A third of the urban population—more than 50 million people—has no access to latrines of any kind. “Urban India is a collection of stink chambers.” About one-and-a-half million children die of diarrhoea every year—roughly, three a minute.

No one, surely, looking at these figures and the miserable reality they quantify, could begrudge India a Herculean effort to improve the lot of her people. Specifically, this must mean

¹ *The State of India’s Environment 1982: A Citizens’ Report*. Edited by ANIL AGARWAL, RAVI CHOPRA, and KALPANA SHARMA. Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi, Rs 125.