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## Poems

Jan Kemp

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## Poems

### Abstract

APPEASEMENT for Jay anta Mahapatra, IN MENTON AFTER EACLALS AT NICE for Andy Gurr

# Jan Kemp

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## APPEASEMENT

*for Jayanta Mahapatra*

To read you is to walk India.  
Cows wander in and out of your poems  
cripples and beggars lurch along  
to sleep, die and be re-born  
between steps, between words.

You say you're too much a coward  
can't give up enough of self  
to do more, must first write  
to appease. Lacking faith, you  
record the illiterate faithful

whose trance-swallowed tongues  
speak only to Lord Shiva.  
Their shuffling feet kick up  
your muttered mantras  
to dance, dustmotes in light.

IN MENTON AFTER EACLALS AT NICE  
for Andy Gurr

I'll not forget lunch in the street café  
from where we could see Italy, the border building  
a bilious yellow set against the French hill that became  
Italy at the building and beyond, all round as far as Trieste,  
round the coast, past the ecstatic, glinting Mediterranean  
where hills hurtle down into headlands the way they do  
in Wellington or Hong Kong, precipitate, stuck with fantastic  
vegetation like the spiky aloes of home, Mansfield writes about,  
that flower once in a hundred years.

You were there and Anna with her flapping coloured trousers,  
as a bunch of you walked towards me on the sunny pavement,  
before we reached the café, walking into my photography and my mind  
where I hold you still and where Jürgen too stays and smiles,  
in the one in which his German face, all offset like a Picasso,  
talks of the African children's stories he writes about, or the one  
where Dieter is forever stopped as he runs to the seawall,  
changing lenses, to get a telephoto shot of the Immigration  
building and Italy beyond, the Florence and Venice of dreams.

*Firenze*, my father's book, on a rainy childhood Saturday indoors,  
its sepia photographs curiously alluring, each with a thin  
onionskin protection against mildew and fingerprints. I gazed  
uncomprehendingly at page after page of cornices and cupolas,  
arches and facades, astonished that buildings could be made so,  
not of wood or brick with corrugated iron roofs; but how could a  
book be just a book of buildings? Where was the story, the people?  
Later, after you'd all gone and we'd visited the hill villages,  
St Agnes and Gorbio, where I could live my life away, longing

for Italy, the Haleys and I made an afternoon trip to Ventimiglia,  
to the market, to a café, to the river, the cathedral and the sea.  
It was all much grubbier, poorer and differently alive.  
The *polizia* wore black not blue, the vegetables were cheaper,  
it bustled more. The others went for wine and seeing an old woman  
outside an Italian *Oxfam* shop, perched on the concrete sill in an  
oblong of sun, I tried out my best politeness, '*Posso...*', she  
scuttled from the sill, gripping her headscarf, cursing in  
long strings of words that wouldn't stop; my self-abasing

'*My scusi molto*'s fell on her unhearing ears. Not that Italy had gone. Later a little girl and her pasta-fed Mamma came to sit on my bench and pose. '*Grazie, mille grazie,*' I said. It's good to be on top of the world. Now, time has flung us all far back across the oceans and we burrow into our wordy cells, Russell and Jean writing from England, packing to go home, Anna in Aarhus, Jürgen and Dieter in *Deutschland* and you in Reading, reading. And to get again to where we were, from here in Singapore, I have to think with all my might

of the air that hung so high above us in such sunlight, that clearly we were part of things, the landscape and the shape of the bay leading round the promenade; that we were friends who knew of friends who'd lived there and so belonged, and like them ate the *plat du jour* at lunch, drinking and laughing, as now and then we paused to gaze across to what might lie beyond the hill to Italy.