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## Poems

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## Poems

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THE FIRST MORNING

WARRIOR

BEETHOVEN STRASSE, FRANKFURT

THE PIANO

### Authors

G.S. Sharat Chandra, Zulfikar Ghose, Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Thomas Shapcott, B.R. Whiting, Frank Mkalawile Chipasula, and Kirsten Holst Petersen

# G. S. Sharat Chandra

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## TAMIL MOVIE BOX OFFICE HIT

Hero, son of factory owner turned reformist  
meets heroine, daughter of labourer in the same.  
Villain, the foreman, has been chasing her around  
steps, spools and ladders.  
It's love at cafeteria queue.  
Heroine goes AWOL with hero to romp around  
water-falls & muddy buffaloes, singing many hit songs.  
Villain, hiding behind a stoned goddess sees everything  
reports everything to heroine's father  
who locks up heroine then confronts the hero  
with a speech worthy of Lenin or Trotsky or both.  
Hero wallows in nightclubs & debauchery  
drinking imported whisky always with the label  
turned towards the audience.  
Whisky improves his complexion  
though he bewails his organs are bleeding.  
An hour of this later  
villain is discovered as a true imperialist  
secretly planning overthrow of the Workers' Union.  
Hero sobers up fast, chases villain  
by bullock cart, lorry, horse & jeep.  
Hero & villain lock hand in hand in combat  
deliver many blows to each other  
to the offstage accompaniment of tabla.  
At last villain falls with much blood & redundancy.  
Hero, heroine, father & the working class quickly gather  
for a group photograph under framed revolutionaries  
for the 17th week at the Republic cinema  
at 10 Rupees for a third class ticket in black market.

## INDIAN FILM KISS CONTROL

(Indian censors have recently allowed kissing on the screen)

Depending on the length of the movie  
a maximum of kisses is negotiable.

Invariably kisses should best be accompanied  
by dialogue how the lips are fated to come together.

The lower class may kiss the upper class  
if the movie is for export.

Where a brahmin has to kiss a whore  
background music should make it clear  
it's a bad habit:

sexual germs passing from mouth to mouth  
animated to the tune of sitars  
is one way of proving it.

Ass kissing of any manner is strictly prohibited.

Where the scene calls for an ass  
a washerman should be riding it.

No French kissing is allowed  
we have enough problems with Danish.

We should bear in mind  
we cannot let overkissing lead to overpopulating.  
The Russians have already kissed off Afghanistan  
we must not let them kiss us off too.

## HINDU PILGRIMAGE

Up on a nondescript hill a legend  
nurtures this god as a mortal besieged  
by wine & women, who ascended to its crest  
hotly pursued by cuckolded husbands,  
then vaporized to an even higher sanctuary  
leaving his mortality in an imprint of stone.

His mythic antecedents thus established,  
the black god stands dazzling  
pilgrims from the high and the lowly,  
for who's there that does not need  
quick solutions from courtly folly.

The high priest when properly appeased  
can expedite the pilgrim's petition  
placing flowers in the ears of the lord,  
then reading omens in their withered fall:  
to expect the god's consort to join in the lottery  
you need to cough up a special joining fee.

Each year pilgrims trudge up the hill  
buttocks pushed into their haunches  
like the engines of Volkswagen,  
to the technicolor sideshow of professionals  
brandishing cracked bowls, mangled limbs.  
The steps to climb are massive,  
built that way to humble the flesh,  
melt excess sin.

You'll hear the rich chant,  
give our husbands that special position,  
our daughters movie stars,  
our sons virgin brides with money for cars,  
in short, give us everything  
we've given you so far.

Win or lose they all return  
each year with renewed fervor,  
blessed with chant, camphor,  
they'll either die or recover:  
oracular mind has no faith in equity,  
compliance is not complicity.

# Zulfikar Ghose

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## IN PRAISE OF HOT WEATHER

What I like is loss of energy, the feeling  
of complete incompetence and the desire  
to do nothing; I enjoy, too, the memory  
of gardens in the gaudy tropics where

hibiscus flowers bloom in the heat  
and one sits in a public square with its  
slow fountain and watches the brown  
young girls in pink frocks, laughing

as they walk arm in arm, a hand thrown  
across the white protuberant teeth.  
I enjoy inconsequential fantasies  
that come with the humid breeze.

There seems no sense to inventing ways  
of survival in hostile environments  
and the busy seriousness of people in  
the colder latitudes is really laughable.

In cold weather I dream of pomegranate flowers  
and have delusions of the fragrance of mango-blossoms,  
I long to be where I can be lazy, lying  
in a hammock, listening to a distant flute.

I think that out of such a purposeless  
waiting for sunsets, the hour when  
the jasmine exudes its perfume and lovers  
meet under the mimosas, could come an existence

of a perfectly senseless fertility:  
the way it is in the humid tropics —  
things just growing in a great confusion,  
the earth's species competing blindly,

absorbing the moisture and the heat  
for nothing more extraordinary than  
existence itself, the vines climbing up  
the tall trees to be, somehow, in the sun.

## AMONG OTHER THINGS

A failure, one concludes, observing the manner  
in which the tulip tree's startlingly perfect blossoms  
are torn by the wind, their porcelain appearance —  
as if nature took its model from the five grimy  
towns of Staffordshire — shattering against  
the concrete driveway, an effect  
no different from a fine thought being distracted  
by the neighbour suddenly turning loud his stereo.

Among other things, one can't suppress the memory  
that places one under the shade of mango trees  
where one sees how fallen and inedible fruit,  
gone putrid with infestations of insects, can still  
evoke the comical odours of adolescent passions.  
Like the fruitless mulberry tree whose foliage thrives  
on being regularly sprayed with insecticide,  
one lives on small dosages of diluted, secret poisons.

# Chris Wallace-Crabbe

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## LANDSCAPE WITH CLASSIC FIGURES

Four big swans,  
black arrows,  
beat up to  
Point Ricardo  
in furl-tight  
formation,  
one skein of  
cirrus drifting.

Never a  
vertical:  
unbroken  
blonds and slates  
corrode the  
retina.  
Just here and  
there, frail, tall  
the surf rods of  
Sicilian farmers.

Flaccus, your  
olives have  
blown small to  
smithereens:  
bees yawn through  
your sockets  
broodingly.  
Day thickens.



# Thomas Shapcott

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## FICUS BENJAMINII

Potted, behind a sofa in Stockholm.  
On a Toronto platform, pruned.  
*Stephan Dom*, Vienna, and *Ficus Benjaminii*  
swaying above tribute garlands, safe  
in its tub.

*Ficus Benjaminii* takes something away  
it deflects light deep into itself  
a shady undercurrent of ripples.  
each leaf with its edge of ripples  
dreaming of dampness, compost, humid  
Queensland summer.

+ +

*Ficus Benjaminii* is mine.  
The original tree claims my backyard  
children growing up share figtree shade  
that foresaw their space four hundred years  
and knotted its trunk to a giant's wrist  
sinews two children cannot grip around.  
They twitch in dreams for such security  
the cubbyhouse ten feet up no sun  
a summer room of green benches beyond storms  
never drought nothing disturbing spiders  
that shall be harmless for life like the work of birds.  
At night fruitbats weave charms to net stars with  
beetles are brought blindfold chubby slaves  
that bump giggling caught in a grandfather tickle  
the fig dreaming us there

we toss above damp sheets  
and return alone, find the secrets, centuries  
knotted in those wrists plunging through compost

under the falling hair of leaves that still ripple  
like summer water when the sun slaps loud  
outside.

+ +

In my knuckles there is the remembrance of compost  
there are green shoulders of leaves where you leave a shadow.  
Stockholm, Vienna, Toronto: there are no spiders.  
Ficus Benjaminii, indoors, trimmed for tubs,  
we call it Weeping Fig in my country but that  
requires growth and so much living, building,  
experience before the right to grieve may be granted.  
You are correct to refer only to textbook botany.  
You have my birth legacy in your potplants, but only  
the rootless exile of its name.

## B. R. Whiting

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### SENSE

Dawn with a lunar light,  
    Sea and sky silent,  
High tide, sand white,  
    The harpooner patient —  
Seaweed waves aside  
    From knife-handed crabs,  
Betrays where fish hide  
    And the spearman stabs  
To disturb the shark form  
    Of the boat's dark shade  
As the surface is torn  
    By the splash that's made.

No word. Near the red rocks  
    In the distance, loud,  
A sea-eagle shivers and shocks  
    The silence, his proud  
Stooping explodes in spray,  
    Then the hushed air closes —  
The leopard eyes of a great ray  
    Appear — the spear lunges.  
It fights with a strong wing  
    And a devil's face,  
Jabbing its long sting  
    With terrible force,  
Tosses the sea white,  
    Magnificent, plumed  
With spray, its last fight  
    Foreseen, foredoomed  
By the fine harpoon  
    That hoists its prey  
And dumps it down  
    On the deck to die.  
As it arches and flops  
    Its torn agony  
From its pale belly pops  
    A newborn stingray —  
The austerity of day recedes,  
    We stoop with care,  
Smile, give him the sea he needs,  
    Laugh at him there,  
A perfect small being  
    Diving through the clear tide  
Of all that we were seeing  
    To his future pride —

The sense of a design that has  
    No sense in words,  
And yet the pattern possesses  
    The flight of birds  
And the fall of the small ray  
    Wavering to confirm  
Its shadow's light play  
    On the sandbar form.

## THE FIRST MORNING

Gulls, cold air, morning  
Created for the first time  
Innocent of meaning  
Without man, word, system —

I saw an albatross trail his wing  
Down waves as great as this whole port,  
High as houses, walled with rain,  
The Antarctic sky storm-shot —

Nets, iridescent oily scum, hulls  
Weaving and burning for the first morning,  
The new day and the gulls new  
Until words come to blur the sign;

All there, the prehistoric light  
And again, the individual  
New and unique, conjured from the night  
To find the words worn thin and dull —

I saw the silver belly of a dolphin  
Flash in the spray,  
Cross the bows and sound  
Down and away;  
Waves ran on and remained,  
The hull heeled over to the wind,  
Down beyond words it sounded,  
A fountain contained in the mind —

The gentle images sing, the gulls  
Fulfil the air, their wings reveal  
How nearly the individual  
Contains the spell,  
Signs spelling the wordless fountain  
Music ordering forms of light  
Around the talisman  
Of things united.

The power in the sound  
Transcends the port,  
Wave and ocean, wing and wind  
In the tension of art;  
Made new again  
The cliché of dust  
Spells out the fountain,  
Writes albatross,  
The waves cry summertime Venus,  
Words quicken and combine,  
Transition, synthesis:  
Singing a rainbow from yesterday's bones.

# Frank Mkalawile Chipasula

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## WARRIOR

Imitation warrior  
in synthetic monkey skins

over a three-piece suit  
inevitable overcoat, stick,

homburg hat, dark glassed  
and false toothed smiles;

he clutched horse-hair  
flywhisk and plastic spears

at conference tables in Whitehall  
fighting with words only

begging his masters for a new name,  
a flag and a new anthem.

'Out of your people's skins  
fashion a flag, their bones a flagpole;

Their laments shall be your anthem;  
Rename the country and it shall be.'

That is the recipe of his rule  
sincere to the last instruction.

Meanwhile, the settlers massacred  
his people with volleys

of bullets, littering their  
mangled bodies like trash

all over our country. Over them  
he preached non-violence, forgiveness

and the masters, relieved, curled up  
in bed and slept without headaches.

Now he prances clumsily among survivors  
mourning their kin at his rallies

as he samples the men for export  
to the deep dungeons of Joni

on loan and Aid agreements  
for the bribe of blood rands.

He demands handclaps  
everywhere he turns he confronts

his inflated portraits  
nailed and hoisted on flagpoles

whose blood-drenched banners  
are birds straining at ropes.

Corrugated mist like fish scales  
covers the eyes of the praise

dancers round him dancing for  
the war lost to the settlers.

Then the songs shore up his lofty  
platform as he leaves his people

at its foot, steeled with spears  
and shields praising the deserter.

They hail him Messiah, Saviour  
as he fattens on larceny.

— for David, and Derek Walcott —

# Kirsten Holst Petersen

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## BEETHOVEN STRASSE, FRANKFURT

Set in surroundings saturated by history  
this town has none.

One day in 1944 wiped it out.

The tourist guide suffered acutely,  
boasting about the height of the glass and concrete banks,  
in both metres and yards  
and arranging them in an international hierarchy  
where they overshadowed both New York and Tokyo,  
and painfully forcing a sense of history  
onto reconstructed old houses,  
erected according to original plans and  
authentic photographs.

In this sleepy surviving street  
large old houses stare blindly at each other  
across budding trees and street-car  
on cobbled stones,  
a yellowing photograph  
fixed in the hot windless air,  
hiding its burden of guilt  
behind lace curtains,  
stubbornly asserting the world  
that was smashed.

On Sunday Mornings in a nearby town  
in cobble-stoned square  
by the Gothic cathedral  
local choirs capture the past  
in well measured four-voiced songs,  
and a small girl in national costume  
leans back as far as she can go



and sees a solitary bird crossing the church tower,  
reflecting its bomber shadow in her upturned eyes,  
and the choir singing rises to a crescendo  
and drowns the noise of screams under falling brick,  
and the still air soothes the tourist guide's pain  
at real old windows, hidden away in farm houses  
and reset in imitation walls,  
and resurrected clocks, still marking time.  
And fading photographs.

(EACLALS Conference, 1981)

## THE PIANO

It arrived early one summer morning  
just before the lilacs,  
but definitely after the tulips.  
It rolled leisurely up the garden path  
on its castor wheels  
clad in a woollen blanket  
to protect it from apple blossom  
and bird droppings.  
It didn't stop at the door,  
but calmly and deliberately  
turned itself on its end  
and marched straight into the room  
where it installed itself  
in the appropriate corner.

With the blanket off  
its dark, polished skin  
and pearly white teeth  
instantly made demands on the room  
and us.  
Vases, chandeliers and leather bound books  
were suddenly missing;  
its shiny surface

did not mirror the gold frames  
of calm landscapes,  
and coffee cups just don't tinkle in this room.  
In vain did it try to echo  
the firm footsteps of  
a proud patriarch  
or the muffled voices of hurrying maids.

And whom could we hire  
to act the dreamy young girl  
or the calm mature matron  
to sit on the embroidered stool  
with her hands delicately poised  
and her back straight and purposeful  
and where is the corridor  
down which the music floats  
past the linen room and the pantry  
to meet the peace of mind  
of the owner in the library?

Maybe I'll paint it yellow  
and stain its teeth red.