

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

**Richard James Allen, *Fixing the Broken Nightingale* (ASM & Cerberus Press, 2013)**

I have come across many books of poems in Bengali and English, but none quite like *Fixing the Broken Nightingale*. It is very artistic and cute in appearance and it is appealing to keep with during meals, at journeys and at sleep time. I should congratulate Richard James Allen for the innovative style for this book of poems that can make poetry 'a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man'<sup>1</sup> in this age of electronic recreations.

*Fixing the Broken Nightingale* consists of a handful of excellent lyrics, grouped into five sections under the headings Natural Disasters, Unanswered Questions, Occasional Truths, Flickering Enlightenment and A Scheme for Brightness. A Prologue and an Epilogue tie them neatly. With this structural texture, the poet adds more tincture, presenting a mysteriously windy portrait of the Woolloomooloo Bay Evening on the front cover of the pocketbook. All the poems are hilariously lofty. Richard Allen offers reflections on grave matters in such a light and luminous tone that they provoke, in this reader at least, both laughter and thought. He touches a myriad of themes with lucid and colloquial language, giving readers the chance to visualise happenings and thoughts. His informal way of grasping real-life trivial issues is so fascinating that it shocks and amuses us together. Maybe he thought it would be the best way to fix the broken nightingale, the human being/the singing poet who is always chased by 'Time's winged chariot'.<sup>2</sup>

The *Prologue* and *Epilogue* contain the poet's poetic hope and desire. He wants to transcend his time and as a poet wants to be a timeless being. But this he cherishes with the alarming consciousness that nothing lasts forever in this mundane world. *The Prologue* shocks and fascinates me at once when I imagine the poet is dancing with the reader of his poem just at the moment that the reader reads his poems. It can happen now or in any other age when the printed poems have been blurred or softwareed into the computer system. In his waltzing, he feels sorry, thinking that time is transitory. The *Epilogue* ends the book, but not the desire of the poet to continue writing. He hopes one day he will wake up like the seven sleepers from his eternal sleep and will write some precious lines. He believes this because the poet's soul cannot die as it has tasted the nectar from 'the blazing river of Soul' (113).

All five divisions of the texts deal with multi-layered themes, but here I will highlight only a few. *Natural Disasters* consists of thirteen poems, which are about natural disasters usually occurring in human life. But the poet makes the title heavy, and amusingly the reader would find a bathetic effect during reading and recitation. The poet has this sort of disaster in mind:

someone in your family once read my novel  
or may be studied it at school  
I found an old copy  
an early penguin edition  
down behind the back row of books

<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth. 'Preface to Lyrical Ballad'. *The Harvard Classics, 1909-14*. 1-14. Selected by Charles W. Eliot. Accessed 8 April 2015. <http://www.bartleby.com/39/36.html>

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Marvell. 'To His Coy Mistress.' *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250-1900* edited by Arthur Quiller-Couch. 357. Accessed 10 April 2015. <http://www.bartleby.com/101/357.html>

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at the bottom of your bookcase (Birthplace, 18)

Or, in the poem 'Famous Person' Allen says what happens when he is forgetting a famous person who has received newspaper coverage:

I got a shock seeing you in the newspaper  
I'd just finished putting you out of my mind  
[...]  
the newspaper sits on top of the recycling pile  
glaring at me. (22)

In 'how many umbrellas or love letters', Allen compares his forgotten umbrellas with 'giant origami love letters' and silly forgetfulness with 'a major contribution' that can save people from natural disaster such as rain and shipwreck. In 'wonderment as a question' he forbids us to question the natural cycle of day and night of the world. He advises to take wonderment as such and to step into it and be 'Gloriously/wet' with its shower. In 'the perils of Unfindability', the poet tells how careful and calculative he should be falling in love, for otherwise his ecosystem will be destroyed or he will drown in waters that Google Maps will not be able to show. The part *Unanswered Questions* deals with man-woman relationships. Allen surfs into the complexities of such relationships with joy and pathos. In 'For the girl who fell in love with New York or A visit to my Emotional Museum' he sorrowfully depicts the imagery of turning and spinning, a usual thing in any unrequited love in an exceptional way:

You turned my head,  
and then you turned my body,  
and then you turned my heart.

I wasn't planning on turning,  
but you did it, anyway. And  
now you have me spinning

like a weather vane on top  
of a building (34)

In this part, the most interesting poems are '13 Acts of Unfulfilled Love'. Here the poet describes his atomic feelings of love and sex. The poems echo a sense of agitation, regret and despair over the physical attachment where the question becomes the following: can the nearness of the two bodies proximate the two souls? In 'Act Seven', Allen writes:

Our bodies are in an endless conversation  
but I have no idea what's going on in your head (40)

The thirteen poems of the piece *Occasional Truths* carry truths the poet feels to exist in this world. Each poem carries different types of truths of human life and of the world. In 'Cerulean

Memories' Allen talks about the beauty that no longer can be found in his beloved who is now 'like blue leaves drifting down from the trees' (71). 'Kokoda', meanwhile, expounds amazingly the sameness of human life in this world. We think that we are unique but the uniqueness exists in all periods and all generations. All live in the here and now and thus through sacrifice and dedication of one generation next generation can continue their life:

*I breathe in* thank you  
for sacrificing your moment  
so that I could have mine (74)

The parts *Flickering Enlightenment* and *A Scheme for Brightness* are the poet's shift from the personal to the spiritual and transcendental matters. He not only explores the deep psyche of human soul – pure and guilty – but opens up the path of poetry and art to goes beyond this fragile being:

God  
Is not designed  
For us

We are designed  
For God

Our task  
To carry grace (Grace 81)

In sentence structure, sentence design, capitalisation, punctuation, diction, rhyme and rhythm, Allen appears to experiment with the poetic form. For example, in the poem 'Act Three' of *13 Acts of Unfulfilled Love*, one sentence moves forward step by step into twelve lines where one verse means one or two words. The poems 'it doesn't take long to forget' and 'Gone Fishin'' liken prose written in a diary or notebook. Allen's utterances sometimes appear in full sentences, sometimes in single words, and sometimes in broken lines that flow freely in an off-beat cadence. *Fixing the Broken Nightingale*, Allen's tenth contemplation in the mysterious cave of poems, is a fine collection.

**Umme Salma**