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## Selected Poems

Durga Lal Shrestha

David Hargreaves

*Translator*

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## Selected Poems

### **Acknowledgements**

David Hargreaves, translator of Shrestha's poetry, is a Professor in the Department of English, Writing and Linguistics at Western Oregon University. Editorial note: Although the original Nepal Bhasa text used the conventional Devanagari conjunct letters, for journal formatting purposes the Nepal Bhasa text of the poems appears here with the virama sign (used for suppressing the inherent vowel).

# Selected Poems

Durga Lal Shrestha  
Translated from Nepal Bhasa  
by David Hargreaves

खिउँया वःलिसे

बित निभाः, बुलुहुं छचाःलिं  
सो सँहाःहू धैवल,  
फुत निह धाधां धिकिहिँ दबुली  
सो धकिं नं ग्वैहल !

माः हनाः झंगःत म्वःम्वः  
थःगु स्वःरिख्य ब्वैवन,  
वय्त भौप्वालं कुँ वैच्वन  
तर नुगः जिगु छ्वैच्वन !

**Approaching Dark**

Sundown slowly all around me,  
there's a hush, dusk is looming.  
Lights are fading, the day spent,  
watch the curtains let down.

Like flowers strung into garlands,  
birds are gathering, flying homeward.  
Smoke is finding its way out of chimneys,  
all the while, my heart is what's burning.

जितः जिगु ज्वजलपा

खः, जि खःका, बीनिभाः खः  
बी, जि फुइ, फुसां छु ले ?  
गन लुयाः नं लुइ धुना थें  
ताय् मखं जिं थौतले !

अय् मिखा जिगु, स्वैब्यु जि जुयाः  
मन, छ जि जुयाः ख्वैब्यु ले,  
त्याःगु ताय् अनितम छझाःसां  
जि थ्व जीवनया जुलय् !

जिगु प्याःचाः

सीथें सुंक दु न्यंक छचाःलिं,  
फय् संलिस्य झं जल्ल दुघाः !  
हाय ! छुयाय् जिगु बीन निभाःद्यः  
थुलि गर्खेस्यगु खल्ल नयाः !

गुगु नुगलं हा ! तीगु मिखा जिं  
लास नवःगु थ्व शान्ति स्वयाः ?  
वा जूवा बरु थ्व छयनय् कःवा  
मिमलःथें वा क्रान्ति ब्वयाः !

**I Entreat Myself**

I am, it's true, the setting sun,  
you bet! I can set, but so what?  
I rise, and it's like I'm already gone,  
all along, I've never felt real.

So eyes, you be me and truly see.  
And mind, you be the real me and weep.  
And even if it's only at the last moment,  
I've bet my life on this ending.

**My Thirst**

Deathly calm surrounding us,  
wind blows over an inner wound.  
I wince. Sunset, what can I do  
when all I taste seems tainted?

What part of me could close my eyes  
when peace is smelling like a corpse?  
Better with thunderbolt, you swoop down,  
and knock revolt into my head!

## जीवनया कुचा

दुःखया बांलाः दु बिसकं  
दुःखथे बांलाःगु व,  
दुःख नं ला जिन्दगीया  
खःनि सुखथे हे छव्व !

अय् निभाः हिहिलंगु गुँचवया !  
शून्यसां अय् सन्न ब्यः !  
वैच्वं न्हां थथ्य हे सदां नं  
सनिलया अय् प्राणद्यः !

## Part of Life

Like no other, sorrow's beauty  
is a beautiful sorrow,  
a part of life, truly  
a part of its pleasure.

Oh sun! The desolate peaks  
weep this time of day. Please  
come as always, alight on them,  
the breathing spirit of evening.

### Translator's Note

I first heard poet Durgal Lal Shrestha recite his poems in 1986 in Kathmandu. It was an unlikely gathering of distinguished Nepal Bhasa writers and scholars coming together to honor the 100th anniversary of the birth of Danish philologist Hans Jørgenson (1886-1954)—unlikely because Jørgenson himself had never set foot in Nepal, and may never have even heard Nepal Bhasa spoken. Yet, working only from Sanskrit and Nepal Bhasa bilingual materials, some dating back to the fourteenth century, Jørgenson recognized the unique importance of the Nepal Bhasa literary tradition in South Asia and the Himalaya, and wrote the first comprehensive dictionary (1936) and grammar (1941) of Classical Nepal Bhasa. I can recall to this day the cadence of Durgal Lal Shrestha's voice as he read—the musical pacing, the euphonious vowels, the richly emotive baritone. If only my translations could capture even a fraction of this eloquence.

In the preface to the Nepal Bhasa edition of these poems, Durgal Lal relates how the volume originates on Nepal-Samvat, the Newāā New Year, when he was sixty-four years old, still in a period of mourning over the loss of his older brother. On that day in early November, alone in his room, several floors above the busy street, he looks out the window at the sunset landing on a rooftop terrace opposite his own. As he watches, the scene resonates so deeply that he becomes transfixed by the image, unable to comprehend its meaning, or make sense of the questions the scene poses for him. After reading the poems many times, and with the help of Rajendra Shrestha, Daya Ratna Shakya, R. Manandhar, and Durgal Lal-ju himself, I slowly began to understand how from this twilight scenario emerged his acute poetic vision, which despite its potential to seem clichéd, becomes a powerful vehicle for reflection on birth, growth, decay, darkness, and the light of renewal. The sun is addressed directly, sometimes as *god*, sometimes as *a god*, sometimes as a flower blossom, sometimes merely an object of the natural world; the distinctions are always left underspecified.

Both the sound and meaning of the poems are thoroughly colloquial, modern and challenging to Newāā ears. His address to the sun reflects back to him, not only the sunset, but the world around him: emotional, social, political, natural. The fused identity of poet, setting sun and blossom, of the visionary subject and envisioned object, pervade the poems; the sparse use of personal pronouns allowed by Nepal Bhasa grammar often leads to opaque and ambiguous references to subject or object, and hence multiple readings. These poems resist simple interpretations, even for the most sophisticated and skilled readers of Nepal Bhasa poetry. In this sense, the poems seem modern indeed. Needless to say, I have been cautioned by many Newāā readers and writers that a proper English translation of the poems is impossible. And of course, they are right—impossible—yes, but futile, no!

**Durga Lal Shrestha**, born in 1936 into a lower middle class family in Kathmandu, is one of Nepal's leading poets and lyricists. Writing primarily in his mother tongue, Nepal Bhasa, the ancestral language of the Kathmandu Valley, he is the author of over fifty books, including poems, plays, essays and children's verse used for mother-tongue education. More recently, he has also received wide acclaim for his poems and songs written in Nepali. Collections of his poems have been translated into English, Japanese and Korean.

#### Editorial Note

Although the original Nepal Bhasa text used the conventional Devanagari conjunct letters, for journal formatting purposes the Nepal Bhasa text of the poems appears here with the *virama* sign (used for suppressing the inherent vowel).

Not coincidentally, many of his poems are in meters linked to musical forms. Although he has written primarily in Nepal Bhasa, his poems and songs in Nepali have made him a household name; his Nepali song *phulko ākhāmā* holds the distinction of being the most popular hit song ever in Nepal.

**David Hargreaves** is a Professor in the Department of English, Writing and Linguistics at Western Oregon University.



Figure 1. Boy visiting a roadside temple in Kathmandu. 37838-Kathmandu (2008)

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