

music

Sowing the Seeds of Rebellion in Songs

By Fayza Haq

MAQSOODUL Haque, erstwhile of Feedback, with his passionate words, flamboyant personality, long hair and spontaneous speech, has shaken the self-satisfied composers of tens of thousands of those in their teens and twenties and even the older generation with his *Auprata Boishkoder Nishidh* (Banned for adults). This bold, dynamic iconoclast is out to question the evils and wrongs in our politics, economy, religion and set of rules in our society. He does not spare the *mullahs* or the ministers. He has worked out a unique Bengali version of protest chants. He speaks for a generation caught in the quicksand of poor politics affiliated to poor economics. A singer-composer, this street-wise singer sows the feeling of discontentment and disillusionment with songs like *Parwardegar* (creator) in which the dove of peace is presented in the slaughtered state. Maqsood, or Mac, as his friends call him has come a long way to pleasing clientele at sophisticated Sheraton Hotel dance floor, combining Bangladeshi folk with the western rock. From catchy and sensuous *ragges* he has developed into a seeker of the truth delving in the roots of the country's heritage, specially the Bauls.

Is Maqsood not afraid of repercussions because he has been so frank about the Bangladeshi fascination for martyrs, the corruption among politicians and the turmoil in the parliament? He has openly condemned the state of democracy in Bangladesh. He has used strong terms. Has he no fear of people frowning on his sarcasm and criticism? Maqsood believes that what we have inherited over the last 27 years is a colonialism of fear. "If there is anything to fear then there is only the fear of God. What has been ingrained into my system is the truth. I believe I have spoken for the people. Perhaps I've been a bit too frank. Yet I have crossed the threshold of fear." In a place like Bangladesh we have tried to capitalise on the ultra nationalism. But who doesn't love his country? It is time that enough nonsense has been tolerated. Whatever I have said has also been said by politicians. I believe my viewpoint is a neutral one. I do not patronise any particular party. Perhaps I'm not a great Muslim as I do not patronise Jamaat-e-Islam. I don't recognise the Jatiya Party. Yet I have the democratic right to express my feelings. Whoever speaks today has some affiliation with the left, right or centre. What about the common people? Only 50,000 people are actively involved in politics. How can they put their foot down on 12 crore people of Bangladesh? How long are people going to take it? Is it what people want? The mandate of the people has never been wrong. What has been incorrect is that tradition let us down. You hear things about 'Pakistaner dalaal' or 'American dalaal'. I am a collaborator for

Bangladesh. I somehow feel I am the voice of the people. I have worked for so many years as a cultural activist. Two lakh albums of my last song were sold. If four people have heard one album, then eight lakh people have heard it."

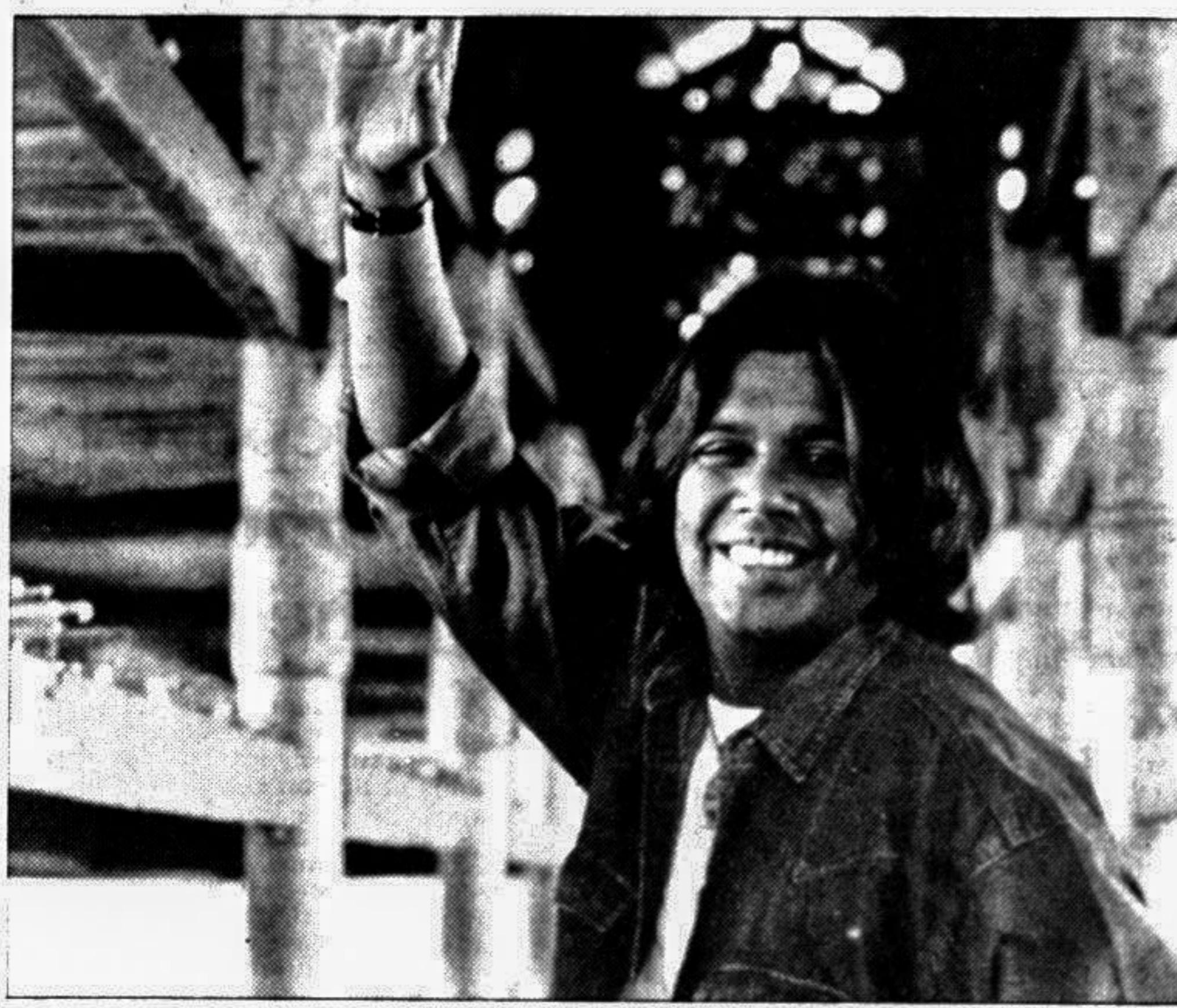
For whom is the music aimed at? Maqsood replies promptly: "My songs are aimed at the young. My audience is between 15 and 27 years or may be 30 years. These are the people who come to our concerts. On December 25th there were 16 bands playing a token performance of half an hour each. It started at 11 am and went upto 8 pm at night. As for our band, it has given more than 500 concerts — I've lost count."

What is Maqsood inspired by? "Basically my politics is anti-politics. Politicians are a peculiar breed. They don't belong to the people as they don't hold up the aspiration of the people. Our generation is waking up. When we say 'ekatumer chetona' we realise that. The child born in '71 is an adult now and can think for himself. Our elder brothers went to the way and were *mukti joddhas*. We love and respect them but I doubt that we trust them. This is because at some time they have decided that the Liberation War is over when my generation thinks it is still on and has not come to a natural end."

"In my love themes I have concentrated on how I feel about women, love, and God. I've spent four years working with the *Bauls* of Bangladesh which is very much an esoteric exercise. In talking about a dead love I did not mean to depress — it was simply a comparison in 'Choley Geley'. I have spoken of attar, roses and camphor which are the traditional elements of a burial. I mean to say that I wanted my love to go away but it didn't. This is meant to be a satire of traditional love."

"My greatest inspiration comes from within me. I have years of training. I am completely self-taught. I am musically illiterate. I don't know what a chord is. I don't play any instrument. I simply sing and I write. I give music direction. Working with a group is a chemistry. I am interested in *Rabindra Sangeet* and *Palligeeti*. I have particularly concentrated on *Baul* tradition with its 600 years old tradition. *Palligeeti* is considered by some as a subordinate culture but this is not so. Working with *Bauls* I realise that we with our city bred culture are the subordinate people. If I sing a *Rabindra Sangeet* it might be a bigger hit than many of the attempts of your other established singers; but I will not. I believe Rabindranath had some arrogance — specially in his treatment of the *Bauls*. I respect Rabindranath but I don't trust him."

Is he influenced by western pop songs? Maqsood says, "I was influenced by the whole spectrum. Specially the sixties and seventies' hippie music. As far as radicalism in music is concerned it has been Bob Marley from Jamaica, Bob Dylan, African music, rock music like Uriah Heep, Deep Purple, The Beatles, Pink Floyd, and WHO."



There is an allegation that he has corrupted the traditional music of the country — how does he feel about it? "This is not entirely unfounded. We have something like 500 sur (tunes) in our country. While I was working with the *Bauls* as an anthropological work I realised to my honour that *Bari, Shari, Bhatiyali, Palli* etc songs all come down to 30 tunes. We have a thousand lyrics but the tune is the same. What is the point in having lyrics if you have lost the tunes? Very few of our young musicians listen to traditional music because they don't have the time. If I sang a *Baul* song with an *ekta*, believe me, no one will listen. But if you make the song jazzy and funky you will be remembered hundred years from now. People will not forget that in '97 a mad person called Maqsood stirred up the world. I want to be remembered purely for my preservation work. I have reconstructed and I don't care if people think I've deconstructed. If Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan could make *qawwali* international why can't I do the same with *Baul* music?"

Does he think he has done the right thing? Maqsood replies boldly, "I don't think that what I've done is blasphemy. This is because culture today is no longer stagnant: it is dynamic. Jaiuttal, and Kula Shaker have experimented with Hindu hymns. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan brought Sufi revival. The revival of *Baul* culture is similarly very rich. Culture is a forward and backward process. My work is a mixture of *Baul* and Jazz. Jazz itself is a semi-classical western form. I'm trying to incorporate *Baul*, which is a classical form with jazz. This is probably what the people want to hear. To make my presence felt I must know my roots. Deep down I must know from where I emerge. I am not imitating

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan for he is a different cup of tea. The whole idea of combining Jazz with *qawwali* was that of Bali Sagu. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan was merely the singer. The international global music is jazz just as English and French are international languages. Jazz, a high form of music, don't forget, came from Africa. Africans could communicate and relate with others much before the white man, in my opinion. The pop and rock scene is somewhat racist one. Jazz, on the other hand, is the centre of the world music. The war between the cultures will come down to that between black and white. I'm all for the coloured people and their culture. I want to remove the general misconception that jazz is something totally western. Also, I want people to remember that the guitar is a Muslim invention. Singing on the 4th and 5th octave or harmony is a Muslim vogue. The marching band too is a Muslim invention. I'm not shouting for the underdogs. I'm proud of being a Muslim. If someone thinks I'm a fundamentalist that's his problem. The problem with Islam today is that it is the best religion with the worst followers. You never hear of Christian fundamentalists or Jewish fundamentalists. Our intellectual elite and doyens of our culture think we are in a backward trip. They have no idea of what the global culture is going to be. The next revolution that is going to be is going to be spearheaded by music. Who has the time to read books and the weighty columns of the daily newspapers? To understand music you don't need an educational background."

How does he compare the Bangladeshi bands with those in the subcontinent? Maqsood says, "The whole rock culture is only here in Bangladesh. You don't hear of an Indian

rock band that plays Hindi music. Similarly you don't hear of a Pakistani rock band — the one or two that are there are basically pop. After '71 we had Azam Khan. The rock revolution started after the War. The rock movement in Bangladesh is a product of the War. Rock arrogance says to the establishment 'You don't care about us and we don't care about you. We are happy with ourselves.' I think our bands are better than other Asian bands."

Does he think the Bangladeshi rock

groups are at par with the western rock groups? Maqsood, "No, we are not at par — we have a whole lot of work to do. The rock industry is only a few years old in Bangladesh. There was no cassette industry before '85. There are a whole lot of infrastructural problem that we are trying to sort out. Such as problems of distribution and copyrights. The biggest problem that we face is that the media does not understand us. In *The Daily Star*'s entertainment page there are only Hindi singers. I've never seen a Bangladeshi band cassette on the spotlight. Their myopic vision goes only up to Bombay. Take the other papers — the same applies to them too."

What does he think of Bangladeshi culture? Maqsood says, "I don't spend much time reading Bangladeshi books. However, I read other books on philosophy, religion and contemporary politics."

How many hours does he spend in practice and what does he think of the other bands in Bangladesh? "In winter I practice six hours a day, five days a week with the band. Music is a thinking process. I want to sing songs that will entertain people and are going to be meaningful. The other bands keep these same things in mind. Bands like 'Miles' and 'Renaissance' are doing their own thing. I have respect for them although I may not approve of them. I have my own priorities and own way of looking at things. Similarly, I have my own goals for the future. A cassette album is an imprint in the minds for generations to come. It is like all good art work. I don't want my music to be just another song. I am a professional but making money is not all for me. I don't want to prostitute my ideology. I am satisfied with limited means. I don't need a huge bank balance or a fancy automobile to keep me happy."

"I've been with 'Feedback' for 22 years. Now I have my own band 'Dhaka' which is nine weeks old. Salim Haider, the guitarist, is fond of like me. Sikander Ahmed Khokon on the base. The two are from 'Feedback'. Rubaiyat Firduous is a young guitarist. The drummer Montu and keynote player Tomoy are also in their early twenties. I am like a friend to my group just as I am a friend to my son," Maqsood adds about his group.

With a missionary zeal characteristic of pioneers of any particular sense of art, Maqsood has gone for a no-holds-barred approach. The feeling of alienation is expressed powerfully. "Either give us peace, jobs and a chance to live, or let us find our own illegal ways," sings the poet. The ability to dance remains Maqsood's priority, but the message in the music has taken an unmistakable character of protest. Thus we see a new activism through art. Maqsood is truly the rebel poet of Dhaka."

poems

Grand Death

By Z A Khan

(In memory of my mother Late Rebeca Sultana Chowdhury)

The earth shivers no more
As my mother's feet do not strike her floor
The shrill elderly voice of love
That carried afflatus message of doves
Has been gaged by merciless writ of death
Yet has failed to temper with her faith
That good survives through eternity
Even when it is threatened by calamity.
Oh you sage and doer of right
Sleep well with your bosom wide,
To make room for those
That have resolved to chase
The cause that befit our being
And imbibe us to do right thing
Pray, let not the obscurity settle
On your long nourished mettle.
For, your spirit kindled hopes in many
And pigmyed our acts of ignominy
Your eternal home requires no sprawling dome
Nor does it require an epitaph on the tomb,
As your memory shall remain imprinted
In many that you have helped undaunted
Oh the guards of death,
Let her sleep in her final hearth
Undisturbed by trifles of the life
And actions that could have agitated her belief

Nine Poems by Nazim Mahmood

A Hope Against Hope

My mind jumps wild if you cast
A spell of shower on a burnt-out land
With a spear shot up for the right
Of possession of a beloved hand

The earth turns into a planet strange

A forest flung upward in thirst
Birds cry out in blithe spirit
A lover's heart seems to burst

My mind jumps at the impossible
A See-Morag or a Blue Bird to win
Braving thousand pitfalls on the way
A hope against hope I do pin.

The Best Medicine

If it's the love itself that you love
Why do you tuck in flowers
Into so many chignons or bob
By stripping your own bowers
The much sought-out treasure trove
If within reach by a dive in the mind
Why not close you eyes and sob
For that and leave all desires behind
In fact, it's love we love indeed
A whipping master who allows no rest
Yet for life it's love we need
The food of foodstuff, the medicine best

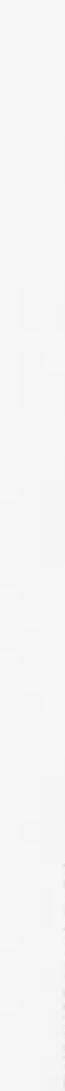
Wait

Your Promise to come for a rest
When the sun goes down the west
With the blush of a new bride
And dips slow with its pride
Stirs, as time ticks out,
In my mind all the doubt.
Hoping against hope at a window
As far as my eyes can go
It's all a sea of steam and dust
The reward of a lover at last!
Your promise to crush in a puff
Hills on your way into snuff,
And your words 'love knows no bar'
Turn into a drum feeble afar



A Bilwa Mongal

My friend, give me your hand
A Bilwa Mongal here I do stand
For the lust for a new Chintamoni
I do suffer all the agony
Crossing a river on a floating corpse
Taking the snakes for climbing ropes
I defy the social norms bizarre
For my love and true desire
Give your hand my friend dear
Let there pass a thousand year
Let me say in a volcanic voice
We call our planet 'love' by choice.



The Same Tale

Time ticks out in drops
Leaves dry up in fold
The mind finds here no props
The coffee gets at last cold
Time ticks out in drops
The life weaves anew a tale
With the same seed it crops
Over and again to fail.



A Flash of Your Eyes

A flash of your eyes shakes the earth
Turns a city like Troy into a hearth
Breaks the long meditation of a sage
And makes an Edward quit his royal cage

A flash of your eyes brings a pleasant shower
To enrich the civilization with many a flower
The more the flashes from age to age
The more we turn over a new page.



A Maze

The youth has a maze of its own
Where entry is easy, but exit unknown
Flying and fleeing like a wild spark
Yet there on we have to embark
Life has only a one way run
There's no look-back, no return
The youth whirls round its maze
Life wears a helpless gaze.

Your Kiss

The more you kiss me, the more
My passion overflows the shore
The wild waves splashing
The blind demons dashing
Against your mind to unlock the door
The more you kiss me, the more
My heart melts down to its core
Drops of blood oozing
My world seems boozing
I feel what I felt never before