

music

## Sowing the Seeds of Rebellion in Songs

By Fayza Haq

**M**AQSOODUL 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 *Aupranta Boishkoder Nishid-dho* (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 *Parwardagar* (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 *raggies* 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 'Pakistani 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."

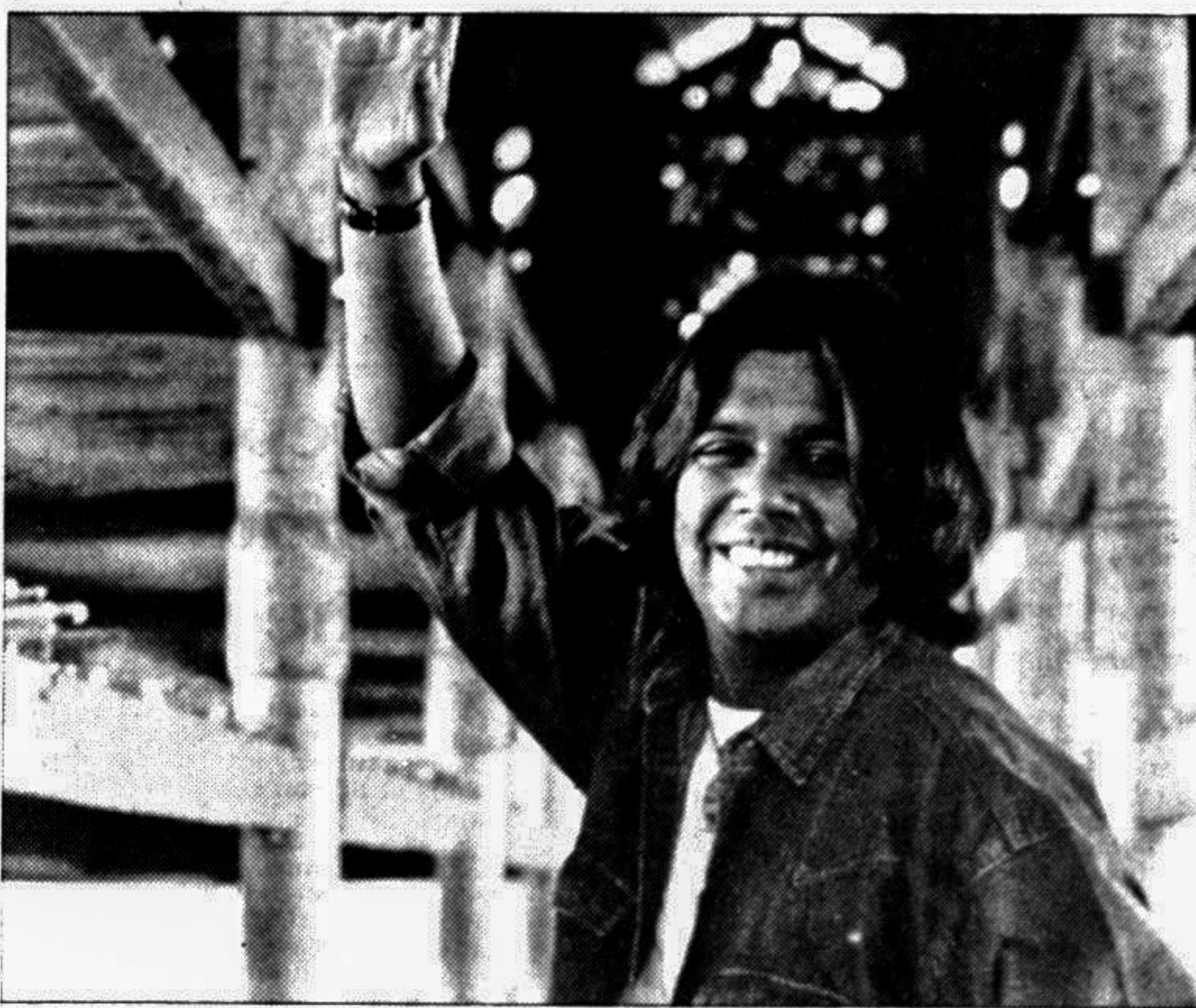
For whom is the music aimed at? Maqsood replies promptly, "My songs are aimed at the young. My audience is between 15 and 27 years or may be 30 years. These are the people who come to our concerts. On December 25th there were 16 bands playing a token performance of half an hour each. It started at 11 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 'ekatturer 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 meant 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 *surs* (tunes) in our country. While I was working with the *Bauls* as an anthropological work I realised to my honour that *Bari, Shari, Bhattiyali, 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 *ektara*, 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

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 is he inspired by? "No particular thing," Maqsood relies, "I play upon an idea. Sometimes a tune strikes me. I hum it, like it, and think about it. I've jumped up at 3 am with a song in my mind. I've put on all the lights, with my wife angry with me, and I've written a song. There are songs that I've written is half an hour, and there are others that have taken me six to eight months. My songs are impressions on post-modernistic themes. No nation can survive unless it has spiritual development. Along with socio-political themes there are themes of God. My music is of the underground variety. Right now I'm dealing with socio-political activism. My long association with the *Bauls* brings in the element of mysticism in my love themes. In '95 I'd really gone through a spiritual change. I turned to God as I had a whole lot of problems."

"My whole idea is to have a change and start a change. We don't have a national thought process; it is confined to parochialism and factions. If you talk of global thinking it becomes NGO culture dictated by the IMF. The whole perspective of being global gets twisted. People want to be modern. They go for culture lifted out of Calcutta, Bombay and Pakistan cantonment. No distinct culture has evolved out of Bangladesh. The rock band culture is a product of its own people. Ours is distinct contribution to our Bengalee culture. I think if Rabindranath Tagore was alive today he would have done exactly the same. That man composed on the piano. He used elements of Scottish music like Auld Lang Syne. He made wonderful cultural adaptations. I'm influenced by western thinking. I was listening to a song by Tracey Chaplin which says 'Give me one good reason why I should call you my man'. How do you interpret this into our culture? The whole per-

spective of western culture is such that the west is really liberated and developed. We have shallow, narrow island-like minds. We think that the attention of the whole world is on us when the world has no time for us. The young generation that comes to my concerts and buys my cassettes can become a core group. It will revolt at one time. They will say, 'Look Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, enough is enough'. They don't talk for us but for their parties."

Does he want to play a role model? Maqsood replies, "I have my own faults which I don't want the younger generation to emulate. I think I'm arrogant. But I am an alternate man. At the end of the day truth will win the last battle. My cassette is a landmark in Bangladesh. I must be doing something quite right to deserve this."

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 forthright like me. Sikander Ahmed Khokon on the base. The two are from 'Feedback'. Rubaiyyat Firdous is a young guitarist. The drummer Montu and keynote player Tonmoy 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 befell 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 pigmied 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 your 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 Chintamani  
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.

### A Kiss

A kiss wipes out  
An ocean of sorrow  
And halts a flood of tears  
It puts a world into a zero  
And fills a heart with cheers  
It breaks the bar all around  
And lifts a lover wild  
To jump like a hungry hound  
For the pleasure of a child

### 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