

In *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe recommends: "One ought, every day at least, to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture, and, if it were possible, to speak a few reasonable words." For those of us who cannot do it every day, we have the weekly SLR! Dr Kaiser Haq provokes us into wondering about the future of poetry. Joe Treasure returns to analyse the criteria behind choosing a winning book. Nupu Press stands on the shore of uncertainty wondering how to craft her way to the other side. And sounding a nay on Dr Haq's query, Poet Ahmed Sofa deftly drives home a time-tested Truth, thus completing the circle for this week. Enjoy the read.

MUNIZE MANZUR

# IS POETRY A DYING ART?

Kaiser Haq



If anyone is taken aback by my title, they should be reminded that the attribution of mortality to poetry is nothing new. It is a century since Ezra Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberley strove to "resuscitate the dead art of poetry." Pound and his modernist allies gave poetry a new lease of life, but that too is now literary history.

Whether we are now postmodern is not a question that exercises me greatly, but I must say that at times I feel we are in a post-literary age. I had such an anti-epiphanic realization when a younger colleague whom I had offended (willfully, I confess) lashed out: "What do you think of yourself? You think you are a writer? Just because you scribble poetry?"

*Touche!* I conceded. Composition exercises in elementary school are dubbed "Creative Writing", but one who "scribbles poetry" dare not call oneself a "writer". The validity of the question in the title should be obvious.

Poetry certainly has become less visible on the shelves of libraries and bookstores. This was not the case even fifty years ago, when every major publisher proudly promoted an impressive poetry list. Anthologies of various kinds of verse, and poetry series abounded. And they travelled the world, ending up in bookstores that did brisk

business in the urinous atmosphere around the old Dhaka Stadium.

Poetry publishing has become a fugitive enterprise, subsisting on meager subsidies. Most individual collections are self-published, and distributed free. While popular as well as quality fiction and non-fictional prose are co-published in several cities, even well-known poets appear in only one place and have a limited readership, coterie-based, regional, perhaps – in the case of a few lucky ones – national. How many living American or British poets are published on both sides of the Atlantic? You could count them on your fingertips, with the pinkies to spare.

It is a good thing that performance poetry has come to enjoy modest popularity in the Anglophone world. But it has an unavoidable tendency to go for accessibility and pounding rhythms, forgoing the struggle to pack in complexities of tone, emotion and thought.

In France the situation is even more dismal. There are self-absorbed coteries, no doubt, but a larger poetry scene is missing. Recent French poetry is hardly translated into English; the few anthologies of modern French poetry in English translation stop at Yves Bonnefoy or Phillippe Jacottet. True,

there are marvelous institutions like the *Place us Poeme* in Ivry, headed by the poet Francis Combes, responsible for organizing lively Poetry Biennales; but the thrust of a unified sensibility into the poetic enterprise seems to be missing in the culture as a whole. Erik Orsonne, economist, adventurer, man of letters, winner of the 1988 Prix Goncourt, told me at a lunch hosted by our mutual friend Olivier Litvine, that much of French poetic talent is being channeled into *chansons*, while those who consider themselves serious poets have sadly taken to exploring the cul-de-sac of sterile linguistic experiment.

Is poetry then a dying art? It is facing a crisis no doubt, but all is not lost. The great poets of the last century, Yeats, Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Rilke, Valery, Neruda, Milosz, Brodsky, Ginsberg, down to the still living Derek Walcott, are among the greatest of modern writers. There are fine younger poets in plenty of writing today. The economics of publishing may be unfavorable to poetry, but new avenues of dissemination, like the internet, can be used to good effect. This is a matter that calls for another article; I will stop for now.

*Dr Kaiser Haq is a poet, translator, essayist, critic and academic.*

# How To Choose a Winner

Joe Treasure

Earlier this month I commented on the relatively narrow range, in geographic terms, of the Man Booker long list. Reading the shortlist I'm struck by its artistic diversity. If you were a judge, how would you choose a winner from among such different books? Here are some possible strategies.

**1.Go for an epic.** Richard Flanagan and Neel Mukherjee both illuminate historic events with intimate human drama. In Flanagan's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Dorrigo Evans, who has risen from poverty to become a distinguished surgeon, is invaded by memories of a life shaped by war and his experience as a prisoner of the Japanese working on the infamous 'Death Railway'. Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* concerns a household in 1960s West Bengal caught up in violent social change. The three generations of the Ghosh family are brilliantly brought to life, with their squabbles and rivalries, struggling to coexist in the four-storey family home while endangered by external events beyond their control.

**2.Look for innovation.** If you're drawn to novels that extend the possibilities of the form, there are a couple to choose from. Howard Jacobson's *J* drops us into a future world, in which the unspeakable event that has changed everything comes slowly into focus through a collage of narratives. Ali Smith offers two stories that can be read in either order, one set in renaissance Italy, one in present day England. There's a luminous sense of place and the dialogue sings. Always fresh and playful, in *How to be Both* Smith brings a light touch to big questions of art and mortality.

**3.Demand the truth.** The two American books contrast interestingly here. In Joshua Ferris's *To*

*Rise Again at a Decent Hour*, the New York dentist-narrator, complaining in a characteristic moment how hard it is to get a table in a Manhattan restaurant, tells us that his girlfriend Connie "once told a reservationist that she was dying of stomach cancer and had chosen that restaurant as her last meal out". A sentence like that has no purpose except to make me laugh. And if it fails at that, it fails altogether, because I don't believe it. Karen Joy Fowler's narrator in *We are All Completely Beside Ourselves* has her own kind of wisecracking style. "My father," she tells us, was "a college professor and a pedant to the bone. Every exchange contained a lesson, like the pit in a cherry. To this day, the Socratic

method makes me want to bite someone." That's funny. But it doesn't live or die on its ability to amuse.

**4.Choose an author who can get out of the way of the story.** Jacobson is never dull, often brilliant and constantly challenging, but perhaps too certain of what he thinks and too determined that we should think the same. Mukherjee, in contrast, creates multiple perspectives, Smith pushes the limits of freedom both for characters and readers, and the best of Flanagan's storytelling feels as natural as breathing.

*Read more of Joe Treasure at <http://joetreasure.blogspot.co.uk/>*

## EXECUTIONER TIME (Jollad Shomoy)

Ahmed Sofa  
(Translated by Munize Manzur)

Dangerously armed, how you dance Executioner Time  
When you must but be stilled,  
In the dark, souls are killed,  
While, under the spotlight, innocent heads roll.

Behemoth Time you render asunder, in broken pauses  
Somehow crawling on, heeding nary a principle nor a law  
Down a hellish path chopping as you go  
At the roots of our morals so grandeur.  
You are forced upon us like an illegitimate child  
Playing with people's hearts as if mere dolls.  
You cut as you please, tax us with callous ease,  
The sins of your womb stirring up a storm.

Baring fangs, Cruel Time you roar  
Furtively nursing in silence, the swinish of them all.  
Destroying in your wake, the last of our pride.  
Deaf to wise counsel, blindly committing fraud.

Against the light, Shameless Time you stand  
Hiding what is right, with your free left hand.  
You rove over our land, planting seeds of ruination  
But some saplings of Truth shall always remain in creation.

# The Other Side of The Sea

Nupu Press

*In her monthly column, Nupu Press shares her personal path of writing a first novel:*

Having completed the first draft of my novel, I forced myself to put the manuscript away in a drawer for two months. I was enthusiastic when I finally pulled it out – until I read it through.

In my head I believed I had written a complex but charming novel that peeled away layers to reach an operatic climax. What I had actually put on paper was, to put it charitably, a misshapen lump lacking any sort of fun or fizz.

In my head was a perfectly formed world, but I hadn't been able to capture it. It was as if I was standing at the seashore, trying to get to the other side. Only I couldn't even see past the horizon.

I had been too ambitious with such a multi-stranded, multi-layered narrative, I thought. I should stop now, take a breather, then start over with another, simpler tale.

At the same time, however, I didn't feel like a novice taking baby steps. I wasn't a classical music fan who expected to pick up a violin for the first time and play flawlessly. I had been writing fiction faithfully for more than a decade, if primarily for my own pleasure and eyes. I had even completed a full-length novel at age fifteen (one that will definitely stay permanently in that drawer). This was technically the third novel I had completed.

Yet the sea stretched before me because I recognised good writing, being, naturally, a reader and lover of books. My photography professor at university told us that when he started out, he would lay his images next to his favourite photographers' work to compare them side by side. I didn't have to scrutinise my writing the same way to know that mine did not hold up.

Finally, I untangled the strands that in my emotional state I had confused into one jumbled mass. I felt awe-struck and inadequate by the great writers I admired. This, I now know, is something that will stay with me forever. Reading perfectly chosen words crafted in the right sequence to conjure up another world is something to be inspired by and to aspire to.

The goal was not to emulate them, but to focus instead on honing my craft in order to be my best writing self. There was no shortcut here. The best route – perhaps the only route – was continuous, unrelenting practice. I had to tear apart the book and build it up again and again until what was on the page matched what was in my heart.

Because despite the deficiencies I saw on paper, inside me was a story I knew I wanted to tell. And I would rather aim high and fail, rather than play it close to the ground for fear of disappointing everyone.

I wasn't sure how to make it to the other side of the sea, but I decided to start swimming. From here on, I will write about the practical tips I learnt along the way.

*Nupu Press is a writer and film producer. Her blog is at [www.nupupress.com](http://www.nupupress.com)*

