

[Scanned document]

Autobiography of Jayanta Mahapatra

Source / Copyrights owned by :

Contemporary Authors - Autobiography Series (Volume 9)
published by
Gale Research Company,
Book Tower, Detroit, Michigan 48226

NOTICE:

The current document is for citation purpose only in the poet's homepage. No commercial/non commercial copy, print, digital representation should be done without permission of the copyright owner(s).

Jayanta Mahapatra

1928.

There is invariably a lot of pain in childhood. I remember mine and all of it seems so long ago; and yet the pain, or whatever I choose to call it today, paces quietly behind the breastbone.

Today I think of the child within who writhes and cries, as he did one ordinary day in a schoolroom almost fifty years back. Half a century, almost an age, has gone by since then; still it occupies this world of mine, as I go on writing my own poems year after year; as one poem slowly dissolves into another, and for certain moments I become a prisoner turning toward this wall which faces me forever.

I was the youngest in my class of around thirty; I was the frailest too. And my origins were from the poorer section of society. It is difficult to say why some things happen as they do, without any specific reason; it is paradoxical anyhow. Did this happen to me because I excelled in my studies, I ask myself? Or because I was meek and shy? But this was true: that I had been singled out as the object of a peculiar ridicule.

The school where I studied was called the Stewart European and was run by a British missionary organization in Cuttack. Our teachers were English or Australian mostly; there were a few Anglo-Indians too. I recollect I used to feel a strong sense of inferiority, especially before my classmates who came from rich, business-class families in the town. They came in their horse-drawn carriages, a few in motor cars; and the boundaries of my solitary being shrunk further as I stood and watched the feathers of their power.

But I was studying well. English, the language itself, fascinated me as much as science and mathematics. Our house meetings on Friday afternoons before school closed for the weekends held a special thrill for me. The week's results were declared then, and I used to wait eagerly for the day. Those were the times when I actually felt the joy in me, the tightness in the throat which comes about with a rush from nowhere—and one feels one is about to cry from too much of it. Moments to remember really, when my British headmaster, the usually stern David T. Roberts, called me to the dais, picked me up bodily, and made me stand up on his desk—for the entire school who had assembled in the hall to see.



Jayanta Mahapatra, five years old,
with his father, Lenuel, mother, Sudharabala, and
brother, Prasanta, 1933

How old was I, I ask myself? Nine perhaps. But was it at this point in my life that my love and respect for all things English began to grow? Or was it a part of my conditioning? My program for survival?

I did not know then that joy could be a dangerous feeling. Something never to be trusted. And almost always followed by calamity, whether one agrees or not.

Our midday breaks for lunch were long, of about an hour, and there always seemed to be plenty of time for games and play. The boys were all older than me;

they had bigger builds, strong bodies. And a hint of power and brutality in their eyes was unmistakable. I tried to keep away from them, spending the lunch hour in some corner of the classroom with some storybook from the library. Then, all of a sudden one day toward the middle of the break, I found myself being dragged from my safe little nook. They were all there, looming huge and towering above me, their sly taunts digging into me, their hands rough and violent, bruising my skin. In a moment they had pounced upon me, lifting me over to the teacher's desktop, where they pinned my shoulders down and started pulling down my shorts.

"Let's see how young he is!" Their taunts reverberated in my ears. Crushed beneath them, I couldn't get free and struggled for breath, but it was of no avail. Against my face was the snorting of their blood, the heavy beating of their savage breath.

The agony of that noon has never ceased or left me. Why, why were they so cruel? I have asked myself this question again and again. Naked, my eyes shut to hide my shame, those boys must have seen then that I was really the young boy I confessed I was—and not the dwarfish creature they had made me out to be.

My balance seemed lost. I had been stripped down to the wound of sex.

Fifty years have passed by since that afternoon. My body has grown, a snake curling about its pain. And now, I realize, this body doesn't have a reason to grow anymore. It's as if time wants to do you an injury, and there are no motives you can find, for anything at all, past and future.

The house where I grew up in Cuttack was located at one end of a cluster of houses—mostly with clay walls and straw-thatched roofs—belonging to poorer people who eked out their livings by doing *suraj*, odd jobs on daily wages. My closest neighbors were well-to-do people; the father worked at the steel city of the Tata, and this fact was enough to make me look up at him with some measure of awe. On the other hand, my father worked as a subinspector of primary schools, and his earnings were comparatively meagre.

Father's work kept him away from home. I was seven, and as the eldest son, had to look after the house in his absence. Perhaps my discontent was in that there was no one in the house to talk to. My younger brother was nearly four. And the house, surrounded by tall deodars, filled me with a strange fear.

It would be right to say, however, that there was a strong and warm bond between us, father and son, right from the beginning, and that this lasted right

until his death. That was a little more than two years ago. Biased, perhaps, as all emotional involvements usually are. Something in the way a father reaches for his son's hand, with a vague longing that life should last forever; I remember the web of force, the silence of which we were a recognizable part. These times protected me with courage, I think; it was a way of education, and it is hard to say anything further than that. Often, sitting in my room in the evenings, I would catch this feeling once again, through the dust stirring to rise in the air, as though I were the only one on this planet who knew of this intrigue in the humdrum of days.

I don't remember much else of my childhood or early youth. No sand towers that I built, no thrill I lived through of the breakers destroying them until I sat down again to build some more. I only know I wanted to love another, wanting probably to make it a desperate adventure, as desperate as love could be. I wanted so frantically to build a bond of love.

But times were different then. I am talking of the time when World War II had just begun. Blackout had been imposed; an air base had been established beyond the river which encircled our town. The newspapers carried daily accounts of the war, and the campaigns never failed to excite both brothers. We were then, the three of us, living in the house on the edge of the village; for it was a village—rows of thatches sloping down into the constricted lane that led from our front door by the pond. This was Orissa then: the poverty of huts and hovels sunk into the red earth of squalid side lanes, and the bare needs of our people. The wild growth of vegetation around us, and the misery and disease. The beggars apparently everywhere: the crippled and the blind; miserable wretches with their fearful whines and epileptic fits; young girls and boys with eyes gouged out by the scourge of *pos*; and the ever-present lepers, their attitudes menacing, their armless stumps smelling of pus and sores. All this was something, I realized then, from which there could be no escape. For there seemed to be no remedy for these people; they had to suffer their torn, maimed lives in apathetic silence. I thought of the sickly smell of rotting guavas on the soggy ground. It appeared there was not much difference between rotting fruit and faceless people; the smells of decay and life and death had become one. And it made me watch my world in ununderstanding stupor, waiting simply for something to hide me.

Mother is seventy-eight today. She lives in the same house Father built, although the surroundings have changed somewhat drastically from

what they had been fifty years ago. The neighboring thatches have given way to roofs of concrete; there are television antennas on garish-looking buildings, and the narrow lane in front of the house sports a hand-operated pump for water. But our front door remains still as it was, the same pitch-pained one built into the boundary wall. The aging, ominous-looking deodars and coconut palms around the house have also disappeared.

But the door, it's still there. I remember it from the time I was six: dark and sightless, it was singularly able to stand by itself through many fears and distances. I think of its stubborn mien, of years ago, when that pretty young cousin of mine who lived some distance away came running to take shelter in our house on misty evenings, vigorously rapping at it in terror, to spare herself a beating from her drunken husband. And how I used to creep up in the dark to open the door, the slow, cold anger rising in me, as I suffered from weakness at my own inability to change the ways of the world.

We lived more or less alone in this house, the three of us, Mother, my younger brother, and I, until the year my sister was born. I was thirteen then. Father was away as usual, touring the schools of the subdivision, coming home about once a month. We waited eagerly for his visits; for those were the times I could relax, forget the responsibilities piled upon me during his absence, dispense with the fears Mother made me so very conscious of.

Yes, Father brought along with him the secret of things. There were stories he listened to in the uneven darkness, little anecdotes from his life we wanted to hear again and again. But above all was this measure of courage he instilled in me, as though the fear and the silence had suddenly been washed from my heart.

I have never been able to feel that affinity with Mother as I had with Father. She was erratic in her ways, and as I grew up, my conflicts with her increased. She was shrewd, ingenious, believing in anything she heard, even from total strangers. So often I longed for someone in whom I could confide, like a sister or cousin of my age—but this didn't come about. Mother's rantings went on if, according to her, something had not gone her way. I, too, never put in an effort to explain my behavior if I believed there had been no slips on my side. Right and wrong, good and evil—she filed these thoughts, all acts, into two closed drawers of her life. I was flushed with a constant tension. I didn't know what was important to me anymore. It made me veer away from the flow of blame and liability that life must want us to have at times. I slipped into dream. And I kept my pity for

myself and others like me, sitting for long hours on the roof of our house, my hands clasped around my knees, watching the pale moon come in with a handful of light that failed to reach the deep corners of my existence.

December 1941. The war had been going on for nearly three years now. Our final school examinations had commenced. I remember classes had given over for the yearly Christmas holidays and the entire campus wore a deserted look. There were just the few of us who were sitting for the Overseas School Certificate Examinations, conducted by the University of Cambridge. We had to write our papers using a pencil, making three carbon copies of our answers. The answer scripts were then sent the long route by boat to Britain; consequently, our results took almost six months to be published. The atmosphere in school was awfully dismal.

The girl was called Irene. She was not tall, of a slight build, and had been my classmate for a number of years. Her eyes, I recollect now, were gentle; her mouth, held with a delicious stillness, could, suddenly, be wide open with pearly laughter. Her walk was the most graceful I had seen or imagined. I knew she was about two years older than me. With a pang I was



Jayanta Mahapatra

vidly aware of Irene's constant presence in my mind, and of that loveliness I could not share.

I had been walking down the empty corridors of the school, searching for a quiet corner to sit by and study for the afternoon's paper, when this sudden darkness came rushing past from the landing on the stairs, splintering my imagined world to dust. Something had made me look up as I passed below; there was Irene, her elfish face close and pressed against Adrian's, quivering in a nimbus of strange light, Adrian's hand inside the folds of her skirt.

It was difficult to call myself to order then. I sat through my remaining papers in a daze. An inconceivable silence pressed me against the wall. And I thought: Could I trust loveliness anymore? Could I lie under the pines by the sea anymore, trusting the loveliness of the sky and the stars?

I realize painfully how silly I was, moping over something which did not concern me. Perhaps this insignificant event was like a tiny chink in the fence round my life; it gave me a glimpse of what was there on the other side: a garbage bin, an unbuilt house, a half-dead butterfly surrounded by ants, maybe a silent grove suspended in its unsolved mystery. Perhaps Irene, who became this eternal stranger, was all I ever wanted. And perhaps that is the only thing I blame myself for, the only thing I really regret.

Years later, I fell in love with a woman student who was doing a course in English literature in the college which I had joined as a lecturer in physics. I was twenty-one. I had obtained a first-class master's degree in physics from Patna College and was bursting with a newfound sense of achievement. My feet were light; in me was a feeling of right things done. I seemed headed for life. I watched this girl with her thick, long plaits swinging her way down the college corridors and experienced the emptiness engulfing me once again. The recklessness she seemed to possess was a cold breath on my cheek. I felt myself unable to behave like an ordinary human being, thoughts of her eating into each passing day of my life.

But this happened much later, when I was twenty-one. Within a year I had pursued the girl and married her in the face of stiff opposition from my parents and relatives.

Meanwhile the war had approached, closer, nearer our frontiers. The Japanese had advanced into Burma, with the daily papers carrying reports of defeat and of retreating Indian and British troops. Blackout had been imposed in the evenings, air-raid shelters erected at several places in our town. The dreary look was noticeable everywhere; shortage of

essential commodities like flour and sugar compelled us to subsist on rice and molasses in the main. To crown it all, one of my uncles who had joined the Indian army was declared lost on the Burma front, and the entire family was plunged into a state of grief.

But, perhaps for a boy of fourteen, the state of the world is of lesser significance than his personal needs. A moment comes when one has seen enough of that gloom that one must try to get away from it all; which is what I probably did, burying myself in the world of books—seeking new authors and discovering the nuances of a language I had been taught to love. The romantic worlds of Walter Scott, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and H. Rider Haggard offered me escape enough.

Frivolous, overwrought by imagination maybe, I think of my reading of those early years. But these stories sustained me, dispelled my fears—lying there in the gloom of the house on monsoon evenings, listening to the rain on the corrugated-tin roofs, the branches, the water in the ponds. More than anything else, my reading took my mind away from the terrible discomfort I felt more and more in the house, as I tried to resist my mother's actions—those accusations of hers I knew were totally unjustified and merely impelled by her own ill-founded fears.

I kept more and more to myself. Mother did not appear to have any trust in me. It was difficult to agree with her. Was my only fault in not making myself clear about my own actions?

The door was in front of me. I was the key. But I did not try to unlock it.

But what was this door? Was it the crimson sky of sunset, the morning mist that came floating in from the river, or a bird for my empty hands?

The house of my childhood turned into a strange, intense memory in later years. This was the one Father built, into which we moved when I was nearly six. Father had left for the interior of the province, and we lived by ourselves, alone. The nights were uncertain, full of the unknown, and I recollect barring the front and back doors without fail before the onset of darkness every evening. A dismal setting indeed, and one which haunted me with a certain persistence—until years later a day came when I decided to put the whole thing on paper in an exercise of exorcism. It would be right to say that the situation chose me to write about it; therefore one could generalize that situations force the writer to express his feelings and his ideas. The process of living perhaps becomes a story in conspiracy; it is this series of trivial happenings which makes its firm demand in time, bringing about a sort of surrender.

So this house of mine became substance; as did my mother, physically ill with the passage of time, moving back and forth in the listless darkness, my younger brother at her heels. We had no electricity in the house (it was a luxury for us), and the long veranda with its adjoining courtyard seemed to float about in a ghostly light, filling me with a sense of insecurity I could not overcome.

And the picture of my mother, swathed in a sari, holding on to the oil lamp in the shadows, the sooty flame swaying in the breeze, seemed to establish itself firmly in my mind.

Strangely, these evenings stayed as though carved of black and polished bone. An inexplicable loneliness linked itself with the sad-eyed oil lamp of my mother. They came to mean the same thing to me. Coupled with this was the frustrating, numbing pity I felt for my cousin who was battered by frequent beatings from her drunken husband. Perhaps I began to understand what a symbol was, without trying to go deeper into the meaning of events, without my trying to become wiser. And as the years went by and I grew older, this image buried itself in the heavy undergrowth of the mind. It was only later, much later, when I started to write poetry myself, that I found myself abandoned in this past, the past stretching before me, and it was as if I had stepped on a small twig that snapped to make me articulate:

In the darkened room
a woman
cannot find her reflection in the mirror
waiting as usual
at the edge of sleep

In her hands
she holds
the oil lamp
whose drunken yellow flames
know where her lonely body hides

Probably this was how the brief poem came to be, and I titled it "A Missing Person." The year was 1970, and I realized then that I had written the poem out of some apparently meaningless bits of my appetite, but thirty years later. For it was a poem, wasn't it? And for me, unversed in the ways of poetry and with my basic science training, the writing of poetry has been a rather painful course of digging out, of finding my own self, and facing ultimately that part of myself I want to know and accept and love.

I sent "A Missing Person" along with a group of poems to Professor C. B. Cox, editor of *Critical Quarterly* at the University of Manchester in Britain. Two months later I received a warm letter from him,

in which he said that it was the first time in the fourteen years of the journal's existence that they (the two editors, Professor Tony Dyson and himself) had accepted anything from India. I couldn't believe his words.

The group of seven poems appeared in the Winter 1972 issue of *Critical Quarterly*. This helped much to restore my confidence in myself. I was being committed. I had begun, I knew, to risk everything for poetry.

One evening on his brief visit home, Father brought out an old, tattered notebook from somewhere and called us near him. A faraway look kept flitting in his eyes; of something unbound, something of distances that appeared to edge his usual fatherly bliss with gloom. We watched him as he opened the book gingerly and pointed to the already-yellowed first pages on which a childish scrawl was beginning to turn brown. The Oriya alphabet on the page was difficult to read; the letters were in a script mostly used by rural, unlettered folk. Father pointed at the writing again and said simply, "Your grandfather's."

Soon, what Father wanted to convey to us became clear. The ancient-looking notebook was indeed a diary or record of some significant events that concerned Grandfather's life. Words he had wanted posterity to know.

In the year 1866, a devastating famine had struck Orissa. Though the English, who ruled the country, made frantic efforts for the movement of food grains into the province, no rice was available, especially in the villages. There were no roads, and communication on a few pitted pathways was only by the help of bullock carts. Even the tamarind trees were stripped of their tender leaves as people began pouncing upon whatever they could find. Many managed to subsist on unknown roots and tubers; these, in turn, caused epidemics of typhoid and cholera which reached unmanageable proportions. Thousands died, and corpses by the hundreds were literally strewn on the riverbeds to be devoured by equally starving jackals and vultures. And Grandfather, who was then a mere seventeen, starving and in a state of collapse, staggered into a mercy camp run by white Christian missionaries in Cuttack, where he embraced a new religion urged by the Baptists.

I could imagine Grandfather, the thin, callow youth he must have been, walking the still-unmade paths of the land, the long, hot afternoon floating down into the pit of his stomach—as death made him stretch his emaciated hands out, out into the unknown.

The terrible famine ran its predetermined course. Grandfather staked his claim to his place in a new social order. To the same camp had arrived a girl from another village in Orissa, a girl of another caste, younger than Grandfather. But this child, called Rupabati, had been brought there against her will; and once she began living in the camp, partaking of food from the "free" kitchens, her people wouldn't take her back. This is how it happened: The caretaker of a cartful of children making its way to Cuttack discovered suddenly that one child from the total number under his charge was missing. Perturbed, he didn't know what to do. To his good fortune, the caretaker noticed Rupabati playing by herself on the road as his cart ambled through the village. He forcibly picked up the child and brought her along to the camp.

A few years later, Grandfather got married to Rupabati. They must have been a devoted couple. They were now staunch Christians, and they had six children: four sons and two daughters. My father, the youngest, was named Lemuel. I presume the white missionaries must have given him this unusual name.

So, as children, we grew up between two worlds. The first was the home where we were subjected to a rigid Christian upbringing, with rules my mother sternly imposed; the other was the vast and dominant Hindu amphitheatre outside, with the preponderance of rites and festivals which represented the way of life of our own people. Two worlds then; and I, thinking I was at the centre of it all; trying to communicate with both, and probably becoming myself incommunicable as a result through the years.

Grandfather's diary, torn and moth-eaten, is one of my most prized possessions. It is history. Memory too, and communication. And it was that very scroll of despair (what else, I ask myself) which prompted me to write one of the poems dear to me. The poem was titled "Grandfather" and appeared first in the *Sewanee Review*. It began:

The yellowed diary's notes whisper in
vernacular.
They sound the forgotten posture,
The cramped cry that forces me to hear that
voice.
Now I stumble in your black-paged wake.

Today my brother is a faithful Christian, a leader of the local community. I am not. I hear Grandfather's cry, welling back, torn in the air.

Forty years have passed by since auspicious conches heralded a new epoch in India, their

deep sounds dimpling the midnight silence on 15 August 1947. The war was over, but the effects were still evident. In the meanwhile I had done four years of study at Ravenshaw College in Cuttack, passing out with honours in physics in April 1946. I wanted to study for my master's degree; but there was no graduate course in physics in the newly instituted university in Orissa. No other way was open for me; it was clear I had to seek admission in another part of the country where facilities for higher study were available.

Father suggested two universities: Allahabad or Patna. These were nearer to home. My delayed application for admission into Allahabad University cost me my seat; also, I had missed a first-class honours degree by eighteen marks, and this went against me. The only alternative was to study at Patna in the neighboring state of Bihar, and finally I joined the science college.

A seat in the university's Cavendish Hostel was not available, and consequently I had to find other accommodations for myself. Some students and I found lodgings in a house on the bank of the Ganga, and it took time for me to settle down in this changed environment.

I was utterly lonely those first days at Patna. Besides the differences in language, I experienced a huge culture gap. I also realized painfully that I would have been subjected to unnecessary ridicule from other students in those lodgings had they known I was Christian. There seemed to be no way out but to go along with my fellow residents; and perhaps in time a sense of communion grew, the festive occasions of Hinduism becoming a part of my university life. I no longer wanted to bear the brunt of taunts and sarcasm for no fault of mine; thrown into the midst of orthodox Hindu students of Bihar, it was evident I would never have been spared from unpleasant ordeals. The distressful experience of my school days still stung me. And in secret I was thankful that I had a Hindu name: Jayanta, which means "unconquered."

Many of my evenings were now spent on the ghats by the river. The Ganga reminded me a little of the river of my childhood, but this was wilder. The unending flow of the vast sheet of water awed me; it made me embrace the mysterious. During the rains, the river became so wide that one could not see the far bank; and the steamers with their hollow, resonant sirens mowed into me as they moved off from Mahendru Ghat.

The banks of the Ganga seemed to hold on to the spirit of death along with the movement of life itself. I perceived the hush of ritual with sun-worship-

pers bathing on early misty mornings, in the tremble of lifeless flowers on worn-out steps, and with the dead burning day after day on their wood pyres at dusk. Above all, I experienced the stillness of time as never before; and for the first time heard the reverberation of words such as these from the *Atharvaveda*:

Time created the earth, in time burns the sun,
in time are all existences, in time the eye looks
away.

Was it difficult to see how the future would begin for me? I don't know. I realized I was now looking out upon life on a different level. Yet in many ways it was similar to the one which had held me prisoner in my childhood. The sense of dispossession filled the distance.

At this time, clashes between Hindus and Muslims had reached terrible proportions. The exodus of Hindus from Punjab and from the north of Bengal had begun. Cities like Bombay and Calcutta were affected the most; I avoided travelling through Calcutta on my way to the university. The increasing violence stunned us; where, indeed, was the spirituality the Indian tradition upheld? Was this awful bloodshed the price to be paid for the country's liberation?

Perhaps, young as I was, I could only identify with Mahatma Gandhi. The ideals of the man could not be denied. Independence had brought in its wake the daily ration of rape, brutality, and killings; and now the Mahatma came over to Bihar and travelled around the villages on foot, preaching his message of peace. On the grounds of the *maidan* at Patna, he held his prayer meetings every day at dusk.

I saw him there. Pushing myself through the crowds to be as close to him as I could, I was guided by the thought that I should see him, hear him. I didn't know what I sought to see in him. I could not mistake the deepening shadow in his gaze, the lost cry in his eyes. The pain of an India he had never thought he would see—unsettled, bloody, ravaged. And the disenchantment.

I did not know then that he would be shot at point-blank range at a prayer meeting similar to this one a mere two months later. India had already begun to stretch out her right hand of darkness.

The days passed by at Patna. Studies took up much of my time, and the special subject I had opted for in my final year made me spend long hours in the X-ray laboratory alone. Once again, I was the only student for this course. These were exhausting

hours, as I sat through long exposure times, the incessant din of the mechanical rectifier numbing my brain. I can still picture the high-voltage line to the X-ray tube running a few inches from my head; here, in a different way, I had again the constant awareness of the presence of death. I hated the fishy smell of ozone that came off the electrical sparking, the aloneness, and I wanted to get this over as early as I could.

I was back home in Cuttack when the M.Sc. results were declared. My ranking was second in the university although I had obtained a first class, and I experienced a slight sense of failure. The pain of not topping the list was a little slow to go, and I had to give in to the unavoidable; finally to a compromising peace. It was only later that I found out my initial doubts were correct: my high-caste Brahmin head of the physics faculty had decided to award the first position to a Brahmin classmate, and consequently the results had been withheld for the switch to be made.

My reading of fiction continued unabated. Literature had always been a desperate adventure. I explored newer worlds in the work of European and American novelists: Faulkner and Hemingway, Zweig and Zola. I read and reread Zweig's "Letter from an Unknown Woman" and felt the strange pride of having hungered once after Irene. *Ulysses* appeared loaded with prisms of jade and turquoise. Something swarmed my veins—the smells and tastes, the sights and sounds from the books I read, becoming seeds that lodged determinedly in my body.

I met Runu at that time. I was twenty-one. She was almost my age, a few months older; and my parents and uncles used this fact to disapprove of the girl. I was aware that my mother had decided on a younger girl for me. But I was adamant. Perhaps fate had decreed our relationship. Months of agony followed for both families. Finally, my parents gave in and we were married in the Baptist church, Cuttack, on 16 January 1951.

Our troubles, however, were not exactly over. Runu suffered the first year; it was the usual story of the plight of the daughter-in-law in a Hindu family. Negligence, my mother's callousness and indifferent attitude toward her took a heavy toll on Runu. She was hospitalized, her life was in danger. I was standing in between. The novel I had begun a few months before was abandoned by me for no particular reason.

Three months later, after my wife's miscarriage and illness, I at last made the move I had tried unsuccessfully to make since I was a boy. It was a painful decision. Runu and I left home to live by ourselves. I was twenty-three years old.



Shudra Khuntia, Calcutta

Jayanta and Runu Mahapatra, 1955

Today, the house where we live is in the bazaar. A brown dust rises all the time, a familiar film tune from a record shop floats across, and an oriole calls from the mango tree in our yard; amidst all this, I am wide awake, trying to write—moving with words, into a poem.

Why? What is it that pushes me to write?

Runu, lying awake perhaps in the next room; the fruit bats littering seeds on the veranda; the sounds of bicycle bells and a bull bellowing across the road. And I want to ask myself: Is my writing for the life I lead? Or for years gone by? It is hard to tell. But thoughts go back to childhood once again, when I was eleven. A time when I was shifted to the government hospital to have my tonsils removed. The ten days I spent there, in the surgical ward. I can't remember anything much but the isolation of the ward. The red blanket at the foot of the bed. Did my mother come to see me in the hospital? I don't know. I recollect my father leaving me in the ward with my old grandfather—my mother's father. And the time I was taken to the operating theatre. Face against fear, when the sweetish, choking cup of chloroform was pushed over my face, my hands and feet held back against the naked metal of the table. The gasping for breath, the unending struggle to break free I relived once again.

I wish I could not resist the time of dying. I look at the leaves, and feel weaker than them.

I believe the gods of my childhood began leaving me soon after I was married. There seemed to be no god, Christian or Hindu, I needed. And yet, I

knew I was alone. Reading helped, as always. I turned to newer authors, Mauriac and Proust. I found a copy of *Auto-da-fé* in the new bookstore which had opened close to the college I taught in, and pored over this strong imagination avidly. Canetti fascinated and scared me. It was the year 1952.

I had read out to Runu bits of the novel I was working on. Obviously the theme was built over much of my own life, and without doubt it carried much sentimentality and ambivalence. I watched Runu listen patiently for a while and waited until she gave the verdict, "It reeks of Hemingway."

The few "chapters" I had written still remain as they were penned, in two hardbound notebooks, catching dust. But I tried my hand then at a number of short stories and sent these out to the ever-popular *Illustrated Weekly of India*. Soon, each one came back to me with the inevitable rejection slip.

I got disinterested in writing. It was the wind bringing in the emptiness once again. I went back into the realm of physics, this time assiduously doing calculations in quantum mechanics—on the excited states of atoms. And I also took up photography in earnest.

Mohan, our only son, was born on the last day of 1955 in the general hospital. Runu's old wound seemed to heal in the new joy of motherhood. Our time, all of it, was spent with the baby now.

My work as a teacher of physics took me to various colleges of Orissa. My land began to grow on me: part mellow, part fearful. I started discovering it anew. The wash of tides up the rivers where they met the bay, the hills rapt with sun, the ruins of ancient temples in the rain—all these never ceased to excite my being.

I have watched the fierce energy of a naked waterfall slow down to turn into placid pools in a woman's eyes in the depths of Orissa's jungles, and the same impenetrable forest threshing the woman to make her naked. I have watched these things which are at odds with one another in strange fulfillment: the elaborate tumbleweed rolling on the sands, and those very beaches strewn with the poignant sight of dead turtles while the restless tides accepted their death.

Five years ago I began to see my father's dying. It took three long years for the end to come, and I saw the dignity erode, the year burn out, day by day. Something died before the greenness went. We watched each other in silence the days I sat beside him. We did not talk anymore.

Voices both of the wind and of my father have made the words of many of my poems. It has never



With son, Mohan, "bathing in the open at a fauzat in the yard"

been easy for me to write. The women I have known and not known, the whores in their noiseless hearts, the fields of loss and light, and the room where I feel I can grind my pain down to an amorphous mass—maybe all these were the dark mound from which my poetry sprang.

When my first poems were accepted almost simultaneously in two literary magazines, *Levant* in India and *South & West* in the U.S.A., I was delirious with joy. This was a new medium I'd found, having had no interest in poetry before; my only contacts with poetry were the stray poems of Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth we had studied for school courses. My poetry came to me at an age when most poets would have been basking in the warm glow of success; I was forty. And I realize it must have seemed pitiable to watch a grown-up man struggle with the familiar themes of love and life.

But the child within shakes and cries. What did I want to write about then? This woman I had just met in the college where I taught then, this colleague of mine? I observed the unmistakable malice in the eyes of friends at the thought that I could write poetry in English. I was driven now by a dangerous energy and was determined to write. An inner urge that pushed me to write about myself, about the dead city of mine, about the hand which could not hold on to the light around it.

The poet Nissim Ezekiel was a real help. He was, in many ways, the founder of English poetry in India. As editor of the poetry page of *Illustrated Weekly*, he accepted some of the work I submitted to him. Meanwhile I continued to send my poems to little magazines in the United States. Acceptances came slowly, on tiny handwritten notes, and these gave further impetus to my writing.

Toward the end of 1969, I submitted a couple of poems to a worldwide poetry contest held by *International Who's Who in Poetry* in London, England. There was no entry fee. Ten months later, when I had almost forgotten about it, I found an airmail letter waiting for me on my return from college. It said that I had won the second prize for my poem "The Report Card." Along with it was a check for two hundred U.S. dollars.

I started getting together poems for my first book. Language had always fascinated me, and now, crowded down by words, I was taking risks with my first poems. The poems hurt me as I went on making them; they were awfully compressed poems, and betrayed the feelings in them. It stupefied me, the process of writing, building a poem.

Close the Sky, Ten by Ten, my first collection of forty-nine poems, appeared from a small publisher in Calcutta in 1971. It was dedicated to my father. At about the same time, P. Lal, who ran the Writers'



Jayanta and Runu with David Ray,
Bhubaneswar, Orissa, 1982

© Judy Ray

Workshop in Calcutta, wrote to me about publishing a book. By then, I had written enough poems for a second book. *Svayamvara and Other Poems* was published around the end of the same year.

I must confess that at this time I had no knowledge of the range of poetry appearing around the world. I had read little; my reading had limited me to fiction in the English language. The reviews of my first books depressed me. Some of them were scathing indeed, and dealt with the obscurity encountered in the poems. But I held on to the published books in my room, hurt and saddened.

And still, one or two had written well about my work. Ronald Bayes, who edited *St. Andrew's Review* in Laurinburg, North Carolina, spoke of the "music in the lines from a land stricken by tragedy." There was compassion in Bayes's review, and understanding—something, once again, I found absent in my Indian reviewers.

I was unhappy, but I refused to burn.

In the early seventies, when I sent off a manuscript of my poems to the University of Georgia Press, I had never imagined that it would attract such a

favorable reply from Robert Buffington, the editor of the press. He asked me to submit a revised manuscript after a year. I experienced a quiet feeling of pride. Later, Buffington, the fine person that he was, sent me a letter reminding me it was time I submitted the revised script again.

I did. In the intervening period, literary magazines like *Chicago Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Poetry*, and *Sewanee Review* in the United States had accepted my work; *Critical Quarterly* and the *Times Literary Supplement* had published my poetry in England; *Meanjin Quarterly* had been favorable in Australia; and *Malahat Review* published three poems in Canada. These were strong and important places to be in, and they strengthened my faith in myself.

Bob Buffington's letter informing me of their decision to publish my book reached me in the autumn of 1975. Along with it were readers' reports, and they were quite commendatory. George Core was the new editor of the *Sewanee Review*, and he had just published the four poems he had accepted for his journal.

The volume of poems *A Rain of Rites*, my fourth collection, was to appear next year, in the summer of 1976, in both paperback and cased editions. I was contented. The July 1975 issue of Chicago's *Poetry* magazine had just reached me, and my work was there, right at the beginning of the issue, seven poems. Daryl Hine, *Poetry's* editor, had seemed enthusiastic about my work. And my hunch that I was writing fairly well became conclusive when Hine's handwritten letter arrived in November, in which he said that I had been awarded the Jacob Glatstein Memorial Prize for the eleven poems which had appeared in the magazine during the year 1975.

Little else had occupied my mind since I had started writing poetry seriously. Mohan had left home in 1972 for Delhi for university studies; the house was empty. I was reading all the poetry I could find now: back issues of *Poetry* from the college library, and the works of Seferis and Quasimodo, among others. It was almost a daily struggle as I kept to my room, painfully producing my poems. And Runu lived almost in herself, although we shared the same house.

The year went by; it was 1976. And in January I received the most exciting news of my lifetime. Paul Engle, director of the International Writing Program at Iowa, wrote to say that I had been chosen to join the program as Visiting Writer from India for the year 1976-77. He had read my poetry appearing in various magazines in the U.S. and knew of *Poetry's* award that year, an award which no Indian poet had received before.

I would call it luck. Or maybe fate. But I hadn't



"At the International Writing Program, Iowa City, on my birthday," 1976. Mahapatra (in checkered shirt) is seated next to Hualing Engle; Paul Engle, director of the program, and Leon Aguiar are standing; Natli Eray is at left.

ever heard of this program, living in my remote corner of the country. I must admit I did feel an unmistakable pride. Here was an invitation to an international writers' seminar, and it had come about solely on the basis of my published work in the United States and elsewhere.

Copies of my book *A Rain of Rites* arrived a few days prior to my departure for the U.S. I was becoming increasingly nervous, for this would be my first trip out of the country. And I was almost forty-eight years old, rooted with traditional Indian middle-class values which made me feel ill at ease.

But it was at Iowa City that I had opportunities for the first time to meet with renowned writers from different countries. Paul Engle and his wife, Hualing, the Chinese novelist, were warm in their welcome and soon saw me to my apartment at the Mayflower. I was to share it for the period of my stay with the Greek writer Thanassis Valtinos.

But I was lonely those first few weeks at Iowa. It was difficult for me to make friends. Something in me that I have not been able to overcome: a shyness that turned me about and pushed me to the other side.

But there were the occasional visits which helped relieve the hours; visits to Vance Bourjaily's farm, boating on the Mississippi, and the evening when I went to see Eugene Istomin play Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto with the Cedar Rapids Symphony Orchestra—so very different from the folk culture of Orissa.

It was, however, the meetings with writers and editors I had long corresponded with that brought me a certain amount of fulfillment. Hine knew of my stay at Iowa and said he would be glad to meet me over lunch for the annual Poetry Day in Chicago. This I did, walking through a snowstorm to the offices at Dearborn Avenue (my first experience of snow). I told myself it wasn't every day that the editor of *Poetry* magazine asked an Indian poet to lunch; it renewed my faith in my work when I heard Hine comment about my range of language and experience. And, soon enough, George Core, editor of the *Sewanee Review*, called me up to say he'd be happy if I'd read at his university at Sewanee. Needless to say, I felt I was India's favored poet.

The readings took me down to Laurinburg in North Carolina, to the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and to the picturesque university town of Sewanee, where I read along with Paul Ramsey and William Pitt Root. And it revealed how my work compared with the poetry of other American poets.

George showed me around the countryside, where I looked at the historic old American trails in the mountains. He pointed out to me the house where Allen Tate had lived for several years and was now confined to his bed, old and exhausted with emphysema. I thought of my own agonizing bouts of asthma, and of the betrayals of life that were yet to come.

My long poem of some six hundred-plus lines, *Relationship*, was published by Greenfield Review Press in the United States in 1980. Already *A Rain of Rites* had drawn some very good reviews; Vernon Young, in his long comparative essay in the *Hudson Review*, had said: "few contemporary poems in our world impressed me more than these." But *Relationship* was totally different. I had tried here to build up a long contemplation on the meanings of symbols on the stones of a crumbling, once-glorious Orissan temple. In twelve sections, the poem, fugue-like in construction, dealt with the mystery of suffering, with triumph and disaster. It was, in many ways, my romance with my own land and with my innermost self.

It would be hard for me to say whether *Relationship* was successful as a poem. But it was selected for India's highest literary award—the National Acade-



A. K. Mohar

Reading at the World Poetry Festival, New Delhi, 1985

my of Letters Award for the year 1981. For the first time in India's literary history, the award had gone not to a work of fiction, but to poetry in English.

Mohan had been away for quite a few years now. Runu and I were becoming accustomed to the quietness in the house. I found more time to write and to send out my work. I had also been invited to Australia as Cultural Award Visitor, and to Japan on a Japan Foundation Award. By the end of 1983, eight of my collections of poetry had been published, besides three books of poems I had translated from the Oriya. Oxford published *Life Signs* in 1983, and responses to my latest volume were laudatory. Reviews which appeared abroad rated *Life Signs* highly. There was an undeniable sense of accomplishment in me.

Soon I shall be sixty. An age when I feel I cannot save myself anymore. My travels have taken me all over, from Adelaide to Leningrad, from Hawaii to Hokkaido. I have only just returned from a visit to Southeast Asia, where I gave readings and talked on poetry at different universities. To me, however, life's choicest moments have always been the time when I have met with poets and writers I have known, and been with people I care for. And yet, Earth has seemed so very far away at times: perhaps I can merely remember its symbols and lines which resemble little lives that have grown out of my life, or have died in the moments of their growth. Something that

is here I have never possessed.

In a poem I wrote about fifteen years ago, and which was first published in *Poetry*, I found myself once again at the border between two separate regions of the mind—between what, perhaps, I understood and what I did not, using "rain" as a symbol for that substance which makes up my life, those blurs of vague light that pulsate with the days, making me ask at the end of the poem:

Which still, stale air sits on an angel's wings?
What holds my rain so it's hard to overcome?

Today, the same questionings bother me, although I see no specific cause or rationale for such things. But such searching moves me, and I am unable to resist it in my poetry. For poetry is voice—*vaak*—and it is a voice forged from those elements which constitute the world both within and without: a voice which carries with it its unusual power of survival.

Oxford University Press published my *Selected Poems* last year, and a new volume titled *Burden of Waves and Fruit* appeared this summer from Three Continents Press in Washington, D.C. Strangely, the elation I expected to feel from these publications is absent. I send out much less work nowadays, partly because of financial restraints, and the rejection slip still pulls my spirits down. Even when Galbraith Crump and Philip Church of the *Kenyon Review* asked



Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio, Italy, 1986: (seated) Jayanta Mahapatra, Jack Hayward; (back row) Mariano Castex, Graydon Moss, Runu Mahapatra, Donald Wilcox, William McCord

Laurance Minn

me for my work and published a group of eight poems in a recent issue, I did not experience the flush of success. Perhaps the act of writing poetry, if it could be called an act, has only been to beat back the fear of living.

In 1986, Runu and I spent five weeks at the Villa Serbelloni at Bellagio on the shores of Lake Como in Italy, on a residency award from the Rockefeller Foundation. I spent my time working on my new long poem, which I have entitled *Temple*. Somehow I feel it is my most ambitious poem to date. Only publication and subsequent responses from readers will tell. For me, though, it is a poem held together by an inconceivable silence. Perhaps one finally desires to return to an overwhelming silence. And the poem too, even if the poem is an invention. . . .

Runu fell ill during our stay at the Villa. She has not recovered fully till now. Her eyes appear trapped at times. But she is brave. She has learnt grace.

My themes in my poems have changed, some of them. I am keenly aware of the world I live in today; the mournful bleating of goats as they are led to the municipal slaughterhouse in my town every morning awakens me. There seems to be debris everywhere;

over the deep blue sea, across the broken grain in the fields of India, in the answers to questions our children do not need anymore. Even over the naked body of death which my fingers are afraid to touch. And this debris becomes the nowhere that springs from the knowledge of death.

Mohan is married now to Miriam, and they live in Ahmedabad, very far from where we live. They have a baby girl, Ayesha.

I don't have much to do today, but only those things I want to do. Editing the new poetry journal *Kavya Bharati* and the poetry for the Sunday edition of *The Telegraph* occupies some of my time. I have turned down lucrative offers of employment; among them the directorship of the All India Poetry Centre at Bhopal in central India. Perhaps in my freedom I have found ample reward.

Meanwhile I await the publication of *Temple*. Its theme, Woman. Woman who represents *sakti* in Hindu mythology—both creator and destroyer. I have learnt to live with my asthma and repeated migraines. There is also movement I seem to be waiting for; in a piece of stone, in the cry of the girl burnt to death by her in-laws in my town three years back; and the shout of a girl at the counter in the



Jan Kemp

Jayanta Mahapatra, 1988

warmth of Burger Palace somewhere comes back to me in larger significance: "Can I help someone down there please?"

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Poetry:

- Close the Sky, Ten by Ten.* Calcutta: Dialogue, 1971.
Swayamvara and Other Poems. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1971.
A Father's Hours. Calcutta: United Writers, 1976.
A Rain of Rites. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976.
Waiting. New Delhi: Samkaleen Prakashan, 1979.
The False Start. Bombay: Clearing House, 1980.
Relationship. Greenfield Center, N.Y.: Greenfield Review Press, 1980; Cuttack: Chandrabhaga Society, 1982.
Life Signs. Delhi and Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Dispossessed Nests. Delhi and Jaipur: Nirala Publications, 1986.

Selected Poems. Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Burden of Waves and Fruit. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents, 1988.

For children:

- Tales from Fakir Mohan.* Cuttack: Cuttack Students Store, 1969.
True Tales of Travel and Adventure. Cuttack: Cuttack Students' Store, 1969.

Nonfiction:

Orissa. New Delhi: Lustre, 1988.

Translator of:

- Countermeasures: Poems,* by Soubhagya Kumar Mishra. Calcutta: Dialogue, 1973.
Wings of the Past: Poems, by Jadunath Das Mahapatra. Calcutta: Rajasree Prakashani, 1976.
Song of Kubja and Other Poems, by Sitakant Mahapatra. New Delhi: Samkaleen Prakashan, 1981.