


Special issue: Practising refusal as relating otherwise: engagements with knowledge production, 'activist' praxis, and borders

Performing arts of embodied refusal amid anthropogenic climate change: the Salim Ali Biodiversity Park and Bird Sanctuary, Pune, India

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 Birds twitter, flap their wings or wade in the gurgling water of the Mula-Mutha river in a special place, named after Salim Ali, the world famous, award-winning ornithologist and 'Birdman of India' (1896–1987). Yet, bird habitat, migratory routes, species diversity and songs are affected by the slow violence of global warming and environmental pollution. Urban citizens or Pune-kars including artists, women, children and ornithologists refuse the brutality of this slow violence by enacting forms of activism that centre birdlife and affirm thriving more-than-human worlds. This co-authored piece focuses on the embodied performances of refusal at the Salim Ali Biodiversity Park and Bird Sanctuary, Pune, a rapidly growing city in the western state of Maharashtra, India. Activism takes the form of poetry, city walks, participatory mural art and other forms of resistance by the Save Salim Ali Sanctuary Action Group (SSASAG). Our co-authorship collective consists of an activist/ornithologist of the SSASAG, an internationally acclaimed mural artist, and an Australian geographer of Indian heritage who went on daily 'nature walks' while visiting family in Pune. We craft this piece as a continuation of our activist refusals of anthropogenic climate change and toxic environmental pollution, and to illuminate solidarity with the brilliance of human and more-than-human worlds in and beyond Pune.

Keywords: biodiversity, conservation, urban nature, embodied refusal, solidarity

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Refusing world-endings: synergies across worlds

Creative endeavours, collaborations, co-resistance and solidarities across worlds is central to our politics of refusal. This collective piece illuminates embodied refusal of anthropogenic climate change and toxic environmental pollution in the Global South through a focus on the Salim Ali Biodiversity Park and Bird Sanctuary in Pune, a rapidly growing city in the western state of Maharashtra, India. This green zone along the banks of the Mula-Mutha river in eastern Pune was gifted to the Forest Department in 1978 by the Wadia family, Parsi business owners and philanthropists. The Sanctuary attracts more than 130 bird species, is named after Salim Ali (1896–1987), the world famous, award-winning ornithologist and has been the site of environmental activism since 2018 by the Save Salim Ali Sanctuary Action Group (SSASAG). This activism by Pune-kars or urban citizens of Pune who are often relatively privileged, is a response to global warming, the thundering sound of machinery from the Pune metro construction site just beyond the park boundary, tree felling, the dumping of toxic waste and state-corporate collusions that support “western, anthropocentric growth-oriented models of development” (Lobo & Hine 2022, 12) and riverfront placemaking.

We, Dharmaraj Patil, an activist, ornithologist and coordinator of the Save Salim Ali Sanctuary Action Group (SSASAG), Abha Bhagwat a Pune mural artist as well as educator, and Michele Lobo, an Australian geographer of Indian heritage illuminate collective performances of embodied refusal across worlds that began with a walk in the park, numerous emails and face-to-face zoom conversations in Marathi and English from January 2022. In this article, we develop an understanding of embodied refusal as place-based collective action and writing that is multilingual, visceral and generative in affirming bird life and thriving more-than-human worlds – poetry, resistance, ‘nature walks’ and participatory mural art. These collective creative practices performed by women of colour and/or Marathi speakers in postcolonial India mobilise action across age, gender, generation, ethnicity and class in ways that extend Nixon’s (2011, 19) understanding of slow violence conceptualised as an occurrence that is gradual, often invisible and “dispersed across time and space”.

Critical feminist and anti-racist geographers have explored the emotional toll, inequalities and injustices that are exacerbated by slow violence that ‘creeps’ and ‘bleeds’ through spaces – it is brutal, structural and multi-scalar (Murrey 2016; Pain & Cahill 2021; Davies 2022; TrueLove & Ruszczyk 2022). Black-Indigenous scholarship identifies this violence as linguicide, genocide, ecocide as well as world-endings and responds with co-resistance, generative refusal and world building (Maynard & Simpson 2022). This response builds on the concept of refusal advanced within Native American Studies that is ‘a symptom, a practice, a possibility for doing things differently’ amid structures of injustice (Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2014, 2017). Indigenous struggles therefore question settler colonial logics, critique the domination of a politics of recognition and refuse entrapment that renders Native peoples as visible, knowable subjects. Within the context of multiple crises including climate change, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Maynard *et al.* 2021, 149; Maynard & Simpson 2022) argues that refusal is generative if it affirms and builds relationships, community, movements and worlds through different ways of being and living “withinside the living ecosystems of the planet” rather than replicate colonial and capitalist logics. Along with Canadian Black feminist scholar Robyn Maynard, Simpson calls for generating theory from actions, shared practices, experiences, collective struggles and synergies that might be different in other places, yet demonstrate our “potentiality together” (Maynard & Simpson 2022, 98). This article responds to this call through a focus on forms of embodied refusal to the slow violence of global warming and environmental pollution in Pune rather than more widely researched Indian capital cities of Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata in India.

Embodied refusal: poetry and SSASAG-led activism

Dharmaraj Patil

Poetry, photographs, my work as an ornithologist as well as walkathons, sit-ins, human chains, chain-fasting, rallies, silent protests along with schoolgirls holding placards, and bird walks for children are some of the ways I engage in activism with Pune-kars as the coordinator of the Save Salim Ali Sanctuary

Action Group (SSASAG). Together we refuse global warming, river pollution and habitat loss for bird species locally as well as globally. I regularly post details of forthcoming events, photographs and comments on the SSASAG Facebook page.

Poem 1

कल कल करता जल कहाँ अब
 टप टप करती बूँद कहाँ ...
 पल पल घटता पोखर है बस
 जलवायु बदलाव यहाँ ...
 जागो धरा के धनुर्धरों तुम
 अब काल यहाँ जल पूजन का ..
 विश्राम का समय नहीं ये
 काल है ये श्रम सृजन का
 जल को मत तुम फेंको ऐसे
 जल में है अस्तित्व तुम्हारा
 जल में ही है आस जगत की
 जल ही है मानव का सहारा
 मिलके बचाओ ...
 जल बारीश का
 जल पोखर का
 जल झरने और जल नल का भी
 जल न रहे तो रहे न धरती
 पशु पक्षी और फिर हम भी कहाँ
 जल बचाकर कल बचाओ
 और बचाओ सारा जहाँ ...
 कल कल करता जल कहाँ अब
 टप टप करती बूँद कहाँ ...
 धर्मराज

Where is the burbling water now?

And where is the dripping drop?

It's only the puddle decreasing every moment

The climate change is here ...

Wake up the archers of the earth
It is time to worship the water
There is no time to rest
We must work hard to create
Don't throw away the water
Your existence depends on it
Water is the only hope
The only support of mankind
Let us save rainwater together
Water in wells
Water in springs
And also tap water
Earth cannot survive without water
Even animals, birds and we cannot
Save water and secure tomorrow
And we can save the entire world
Where is the burbling water now?
And where is the dripping drop? ...
(Dharmaraj Patil)



Fig. 1. Birds at the Salim Ali Biodiversity Park and Bird Sanctuary. Source: Dharmaraj Patil.



Fig. 2. Bird walks. Source: Dharmaraj Patil.



Fig. 3. Coppersmith Barbet. Source: Dharmaraj Patil.

My activism, photographs (Fig. 1, 2, 3) and poetry in Marathi are forms of embodied refusal to the slow violence I see and witness everyday as a Punekar and ornithologist who feels a strong emotional attachment to birds much like Salim Ali who wrote *The Book of Indian Birds* in colonial India in 1941 (Fig. 4).

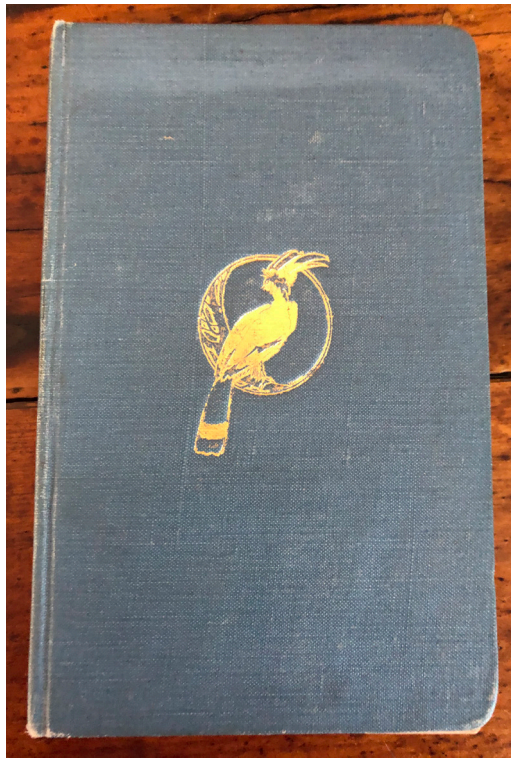


Fig. 4. *The Book of Indian Birds* by Salim Ali. Source: Michael Adams.

Embodied refusal: city walks

Michele Lobo

Perhaps I performed the art of embodied refusal when the contagious Omicron virus was raging in India in December 2021, and I took the risk to fly on one of the first direct Qantas flights from Melbourne to visit my Mum who once gasped for breath infected by the Delta variant. As I escaped from the most locked down city in the world, I was one of few '*sheeter pakhis*' (winter birds), a Bengali phrase that describes diasporic peoples who visit tropical India during the cooler months. Arriving in Pune a city in western India, birds were chirping and streets were abuzz with activity even in the early hours of a wintry morning, much like Kolkata, the crowded megacity that once was home. Walking on busy streets of Kolkata and Pune, the loud cawing of 'common' crows, their wet droppings from overhanging tree branches and perched presence on garbage heaps where they scavenge for food scraps, force city dwellers to acknowledge their presence as more-than-human urban citizens even during a pandemic. In Melbourne, however, it was the stillness of the pandemic that offered opportunities for more careful bird observations and the aesthetic appreciation of urban natures along green walking trails in native wetlands of Australian suburbia. In my neighbourhood, pelicans, black swans and ducks in the distance glide in the placid creeks and lakes. Egrets, herons, ibis and ravens leave the safety of the long grass and assemble on the winding paved path.

I tell this transnational story that centres relatively privileged bodies, birds and patches of urban nature in Melbourne (Narm), a city built on Wurundjeri Country to situate my walk and arts of activism that focus on “generative refusal” (Simpson in Maynard *et al.* 2021, 149) and solidarity with more-than-humans at the Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary in Pune, India. Inspired by Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s (2022) focus on abolition as life in rehearsal, Robyn Maynard (in Maynard *et al.* 2021, 155) focuses on the power of generative refusal for “liberatory futures” in the present. This politics that affirms a living planet refuses symbolic gestures of state recognition and respectability framed by norms of white institutions situated within the specificity and historicity of settler colonial contexts in Canada. This is the affirmative politics of world building that Pune-kars (citizens of Pune) including artists, women, children and ornithologists engage in as they refuse the slow violence of global warming, environmental pollution and habitat loss accelerated by the expansion of transport, placemaking and housing projects approved by the Pune Municipal Corporation.

My visit to the park was an outcome of a serendipitous encounter with Rita, a long-term Pune-kar at the communal house where I was living. My eagerness as a geographer to experience the joy of walking along the sunny riverside on a Saturday morning resonated with her desire to have another look at the beautiful mural art at the park. Alighting from the autorickshaw, the broad, well-maintained entry path to the Sanctuary shared with the Yerawada Smashan Bhumi (Hindu crematorium) promised a pleasant walk away from crowded streets. I was stopped in my tracks, however, by a gigantic piece of colourful mural art depicting the human life cycle on the crematorium wall. Rita draws me away as she gazes at a section of a low brick wall with vibrant colours that I might have easily missed as a visitor to the park. The wall shows several species of trees with jewelled rings on thick brown barks, curving brown branches, thick green foliage, colourful flowers and hanging roots (Fig. 5). The rippling river in hues of blue is effervescent – fish frolic, wading birds perch on small rocky river islands, butterflies flap their delicate wings in the clear sky and painted storks enjoy the gentle rain (Fig. 6, 7). A radiant rising sun, thick green undergrowth, rain droplets and colourful rainbows hold the promise of a vibrant dry and wet season in a city, once a colonial defence post and hill-station in the Western Ghats, popularly known as the ‘Queen of the Deccan’ (Diddee & Gupta 2000).



Fig. 5. Jewelled tree trunks and blooming flowers. Source: Michele Lobo.



Fig. 6. The rippling river with frolicking fish. Source: Michele Lobo.



Fig. 7. Painted storks enjoying the rain. Source: Michele Lobo.

The refreshing creativity of the mural art deepens the promise of seeing rare bird species, listening to birdsong and enjoying an energising urban nature walk along the river. This place across the bridge is away from gated mansions of the wealthy in Koregaon Park that offer walkers shady broad laneways with ancient banyan trees. Walking along a 'kuccha' (unpaved) path in the thick forest Rita and I feel like the only wanderers in this green zone along the Mula-Mutha river. As the path winds and narrows my disappointment deepens – shards of glass, empty bottles, plastic bags, wastepaper as well as human and animal excreta mingle with piles of construction waste. These innumerable scattered mounds and mountains of waste lie in the shadow of large yellow cranes beyond the park boundary wall promising rapid transit in Pune city, a 'hill station' that is experiencing unprecedented heat waves with temperatures over 40 C in summer. Piles of garbage beneath trees with thick foliage, in muddy as well as cavernous ditches and along the riverbank are interspersed with innumerable stagnant pools and ponds that are breeding grounds for mosquitoes. We take each step with extreme care as we look out for birds, follow their twitter and attempt to find a path to the riverbank after asking a few park staff herding pigs and buffaloes. It is at this moment that we meet another Puneekar, a walker carrying a sophisticated camera with a powerful zoom lens (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. The Baya Weaver bird. Source: Rafiq Somani.

As a birdwatcher eager to photograph the diversity of species and listen to bird songs, he treaded skilfully through shattered glass, showed us a path to the river, named migratory as well as local birds, and pointed to wading birds in the distance – the baya weaver, painted stork, ruddy shelduck, red-wattle lapwings and blackheaded ibis. When we were eager to know more, he alerted us to his blog/twitter account and began to tell us about the long struggle to save the park by activists such as Save the Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary Group (SSABAG) as well as environmental conservation groups. It was by chance then that I became aware of arts of embodied refusal by some Puneekars to save the biodiversity of the bird sanctuary and a 'dead river' choked with waste. I began reading about this collective resistance and longed to meet the activists and artists who in different ways engaged in arts of embodied refusal.

Embodied refusal: walls that talk back

Abha Bhagwat

On the eastern side of Pune city existed a rich green belt that was very well known to citizens of Pune as a bird sanctuary. As a child I often went birding there. The quiet flowing river water, patches of shallow water and mud surrounding small rocky islands, tree-tops of ancient trees, small rocks peeking through the water were some of the favourite spots for birds to eat their food, dry their wings and rest. The clear water of the river also had a large number of fish, crabs and moss, which was unseen to the human eye, but an important food source for birds and an indicator of the oxygen-rich river. The coolness of the air in this place and the fog on the horizon created an ethereal atmosphere. In the rush of city life, however, citizens forgot this beautiful patch. In the last few years, the adjacent garbage collection centre, crematorium and Pune metro project has further damaged this biodiversity park. Recent offences like forcible tree cutting, filling up of a flowing creek with debris have threatened this home of birds. A group in Pune under the guidance of ornithologist late Mr. Dharmaraj Patil has been demanding the government's urgent attention and action in protecting the sanctuary. A little ray of hope has emerged though a movement of embodied refusal started by the Save Salim Ali Sanctuary Action Group (SSASAG). The activist group has organised environmental education programs (expert lectures and interviews) and involved city dwellers in bird and tree assessments/studies and bird walks. Other forms of refusal include fasting, the formation of human chains and protest rallies.

My experience as a painter has attuned me to the tremendous personal and social outcomes of participatory artworks, particularly with children and women. I was therefore very excited to be invited by the SSASAG to participate in producing a collaborative painting. These paintings were inspired by my core feeling of refusal – the refusal of political indifference, carelessness and ignorance of urban nature. Initially it was difficult to identify the perfect wall for this mural – we selected an 'L' shaped yellow stone wall built with a slant of 5 degrees near the entrance of the park. It is always more fun to paint on a surface not meant or designed for artwork. I decided to paint the wall up to 8 or 9 feet from the ground, that could be easily reached by everyone with small ladders. When you are expecting over 100 people as participants, you must have a big canvas so that everyone can paint according to their available time and willingness – we used the entire length of 150 feet.

First, I made a rough sketch for the mural and selected bright colours to make the painting stand out and look vibrant. The event was announced through mainstream as well as social media sites (Facebook), was open to all and no prior artistic expertise was required. The response was wonderful. I met many of the participants for the first time and many were not aware that the bird sanctuary existed. In fact, those who visited the sanctuary for the first time were surprised to discover such a beautiful place in the city was threatened. People from all over the city came – from schools, residential areas, working places, offices, banks and many other places. A small group of American students, who were visiting India on an exchange program also participated and enjoyed painting. People with disabilities came to paint as well. I recall the youngest participant was a one-year-old baby and the oldest was a 70-year-old grandfather. Participants spoke of collective painting as a joyful experience. I attribute this joy to the process of producing a unique, all-inclusive artwork that thrums with the energies and skills of citizens of diverse cultural backgrounds and age groups. To make the artwork inclusive, I selected simple forms and textures so that everyone can select and paint the elements they feel comfortable with. For example, even when a small baby holds the brush and paints it is important and can be converted into a beautiful texture – that is the beauty of participatory painting. The “subaltern child figure” (Balagopalan 2019, 231) who balances labouring with schooling, lives in slums and orphanages was able to participate through the efforts of an elderly teacher who works in these places. When children come together and use their hands and bodies in artistic work, perhaps they come to understand the importance of *shrama pratishtha* or the dignity of labour that is necessary to refuse injustice and affirm world building.

We faced some challenges in completing the artwork. For example, dirty, putrid water from the crematorium powerhouse above rolls down and has left black marks on the wall. We ignored or refused to see these black blotches and responded by painting beautiful trees over it. We painted the

beautiful, clean flowing river and birds including the sunbird, fantail, painted stork, grey hornbill, jacana, magpie-robin, spotted owlet, cormorant, red-wattled lapwing and sandpiper. Since the diversity of tree species contributes to richness of forests, we painted each tree using different sizes, shapes, colours and styles. We also created a space on the wall for species of fish, snakes and butterflies who once called this place home.

After the completion of the painting, there was wider support for saving the sanctuary and the movement was energised. As an artist, it was a unique experience for me to work for an environmental cause. A few days later, we noticed some disturbing events around the painting that made us feel as if the efforts of artists and citizens are of no significance. Somebody had dumped debris and waste right in front of the painting. A low relief sculpture was installed in front of the painting hiding some of its important aspects. An information board was installed hiding the corner piece of the painting. I felt sad that the value of pure joy, beauty and environmental awareness produced through our collective effort was ignored, but more mainstream/scientific ways of disseminating information and 'saving' the birds and trees are privileged. I rarely paused to think about the marginalised lives of construction workers or crematorium workers who never engage in bird watching and often labour at night to advance metropolitan and state development agendas. I kept wondering about ways I could continue to work with children so that we as a society can move away from being numb, indifferent and apathetic towards art and the environment. Through my ongoing participatory paintings with children, I try and build respect for artists and environmentalists who play a very big role in bringing us all together! We cherish art creations in ancient caves, but it is more difficult to respect and appreciate contemporary artists and collective artwork in India! Art is the inner nature of human beings. If we are unable to take care of nature within, how can we protect nature outside? Are we expecting too much?

The joy and pain of embodied refusal

Michele Lobo and Abha Bhagwat

The buoyancy of joy and optimism as well as the emotional burden of pain and frustration coexists as we write alongside and with each other to refuse the slow violence of anthropogenic climate change and toxic environmental pollution. Dharmaraj passed away suddenly in March 2022, but the energy of his embodied refusal lives on through his poetry and ongoing activism visible on the Facebook page of the SSASAG, twitter accounts of the Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary and Pune activists. He was mourned as a friend, leader, educator, poet, writer, conservationist, and ornithologist. A prayer meeting held amid the piles of waste in the park during the Coronavirus pandemic celebrated his life and the fight to save the sanctuary as well as restore the Mula-Mutha river. A photo shows him defiantly holding a placard saying "Metro not at the cost of birds abode", but another captures the joy in his face as he feels the touch of a black, orange and yellow butterfly (Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary Pune 2022). Wearing his mask during the pandemic Dharmaraj worked with environmental NGOs such as Raintree foundation and Jeevitanadi ("Living Rivers"). Speaking in Marathi and English at one of the protests he powerfully reminded us: "The movement can only become successful when common men participate and take the lead". In February 2022 a bird walk was planned but was ultimately cancelled due to a rise in coronavirus infections. Since then, the Environment Minister visited the park and clean-up drives have been initiated. A report in *Hindustan Times*, a national daily newspaper, claimed that 13,000 tonnes of debris had been removed from the 2-acre park that attracts more than 130 different bird species including migratory birds (Palkhiwala 2022).

In a newspaper article Dharmaraj said "many bird species like grey francolin, baya weaver, citrine wagtail and pied kingfisher have lost their habitat due to illegal dumping. These are very sensitive birds and they leave a site even with a slight disturbance" (Chandra 2022). We feel this loss when bird breath and songs fail to ring out. Simpson (2017, 90) draws on her exchange with writer and poet M NourbSe Philip who "makes sense of the senseless". NourbSe links language with breath and sound, through dramatized readings of poems that exceed the confines of the page, refuse taken-for-granted English/western/academic norms but implicate and contaminate readers through 'untelling' the

violence of slavery. For us the senseless is the violence of anthropogenic climate change and environmental pollution that continues to contaminate and invade our being. Perhaps Dharmaraj who passed away and migratory birds who fail to arrive participate in such an untelling of slow violence. Even though bird songs are stifled and Marathi words might struggle to breathe in our English translations the potentiality of world building seeps through.

While Pune Municipal Corporation participates in national policies that focus on placemaking projects as part of the Smart City Mission, the Mula-Mutha River Regeneration Project and the Pune Metro project, activism by Pune-kars, walls that speak and 'nature walks' enable us to wander beyond this place with bleeding hearts and feet (see Poem 2). These collective political performances of generative refusal with more-than-human worlds that acknowledge pain contribute to potentialities for a thriving planet. This article has affirmed such thriving by centering the habitat of birds in the Salim Ali Biodiversity Park and Bird Sanctuary that struggles to be. As Sara Ahmed (2021, 26) would say, "to refuse what has come to be is to fight to be" through collectives that are purposeful, fluid and willful. This is the fight for world building for and beyond humanity that seeds hope and freedom in places of the Global South where violence is slow and invisible.

This article makes methodological and ethical contributions to extending and reworking decolonial debates on refusal advanced by feminist and anti-racist geographers, Black-Indigenous and Native American scholars situated in the Global North. As willful Indians/diasporic Indians we focus on the environmental struggle for bird worlds in postcolonial cities, rather than anthropocentric river development projects that recreate the 'pristine' beauty of urban nature but destroy the home of migratory bird species. Second, we demonstrate the potential of multilingual, transnational, decolonial ecological activism driven by embodied feelings of generative more-than-human love from the Salim Ali Biodiversity Park and Bird Sanctuary in the Indian city of Pune that places us within urban nature and mobilises collective refusal as ethical everyday acts.

We end with Dharmaraj's poem written in Marathi that oscillates between grief, pain, suffering and more-than-human love – his shadow and the 'flowers of his trembling breath' promise flourishing futures if we tread carefully.

Poem 2

तू निघून गेलीस
 आणि विस्कटलेला मी
 कालच्या वाटेच्या शोधात आलो
 जी वाट दोघांनी मिळून चालली
 दोघांनी मिळून बहरली
 काही क्षण का असेना
 पुसटशी का असेना..
 तीच मी चालत राहिलो आज ..
 एकवेळा दोनवेळा दहावेळा ..
 पाय आणि मन
 दोन्ही रक्तबंबाळ होईपर्यंत चाललो
 तू कुठेच दिसली नाहीस
 आभासातून उठली नाहीस ..
 माझ्या थरथरत्या श्वासांची

दोन फुले
 आपल्या या वाटेवर ठेऊन निघतो आहे
 अंधारात मी ठेवलेली सावली तुला दिसणारी नाही म्हणून..
 गेलीस तर जरूर पहा
 फुले चिरडू नयेत याची
 काळजी घे..
 जमल्यास
 - धर्मराज पाटील

When you left
 I was shattered
 Searching for yesterday's path
 That we both walked together
 And blossomed together
 Though only for a few moments
 And very faint...
 I kept walking on it...
 Once, twice and ten times...
 I walked till my feet and heart bled
 You were nowhere
 You didn't rise from the illusion...
 I am leaving two flowers of my trembling breath
 On our path
 Because you cannot see the shadow that I have left in the dark ...
 Be sure to check it out
 And make sure that flowers don't crush
 Take care...
 If possible...

(Dharmaraj Patil)

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