

Flight of the fragrant butterfly



Hiruda's passing away on Wednesday set off a minor crisis at work. Pranab Kumar Barman, the brash, versifying idol of the young and the restless, was missing in action. He was to visit me for a feature on him and as the minutes ticked by, my frantic dialling, calling another mutual acquaintance and rather vague calculations of the distance from his home to our office only led me to conclude that poets are whimsical creatures, ruled by their own secret codes of appearance and disappearance, and that I had better zero in on someone who had never written a line of verse in his life, but one who would turn up when expected to. I am happy to say Pranab turned up just as I was unhappily drawing this conclusion. Stricken by the rumour that Hiruda had passed away, he had rushed to the hospital for a last farewell.

Talking about disappearance, one cannot help but feel that with the passing of the gentle, lanky, loose-limbed silver haired Hiruda – who moved among us so unobtrusively, and who never let fame sit as a burden on him, whose luminous poems ached in our hearts long after we read them, it is as if a whole world has receded from view – a world where *the sun courses down the sleep of a thousand stars* and *green waves of desperate leaves flow down dry branches*, and *white flowered fields lie under a copper sky*. And the man who created this universe perhaps describes himself best when he writes: *A sword forged with many wounds/Alive in love and in protest/A real man*. And today, on this muggy July afternoon, he lies swathed in golden marigold, the blue tendrils of smoke from incense sticks drift around his slender form. It is as if he tells us in silent words: *I return home/my wayward legs begin to take longer strides*.

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Many years ago, when I was green in experience and years, I first visited Hiruda at his home for his sound byte, as it were, on our Spring festival. The shy, self-effacing legend sat with his arms lightly wrapped around himself, his chin sunk to his chest, and intoned lines that were as delicate as a shred of mist and as brief as the trail of a comet. Like his legions of fans, I was not only an avid reader of his fragrant verses, the magic of each word as light and tremulous as a butterfly wing, but also loved his absolute simplicity. For Hiruda refused to foster a swollen ego or lug excess baggage around. Such was my admiration for him that in my short story *The Stranger's Touch*. Hiruda is a real character in a fictive world. A pregnant, unhappily married Barnali is on her way to visit her doctor. "So she had gone alone, crushed among other bodies in a jam packed city bus, fighting to keep her balance and shield her swollen stomach from the pushing and shoving, clamping a handkerchief to her mouth as waves of nausea rose up her throat. Somewhere near Pan Bazar, a man seated on one of the last seats noted her plight. A thin, stooping man with grey hair and a long, lined face that still looked boyish. There was pity and concern in his eyes as he rose hurriedly, almost clumsily, anxious to give up his place for her. Sinking down on the seat, she had flashed a weak, grateful smile at him, but he had looked away shyly. Years later, she recognised the face of the kind stranger on the back cover of a book of poems. He was Hiren Bhattacharjya, the poet. Even today she read every poem of his that she could find in magazines and anthologies. *Sorrow sticks on to blood. In the unheard cloud of my tears! It's forever your face.* She willed herself to believe he wrote such words for her. After all, poets could sense things in a few, fleeting moments what other men would take a lifetime to comprehend."

The world conjured up by Hiruda is one suffused with sensuous, emotional awareness. Through it there is a tempting offer to look inward, into timeless experiences of individual thought and feeling, the power of one, the lone voice rising above the cacophony of the market place. He could make even the simplest acts of everyday life, the sitting outside one's home, a profound, soul-stirring experience. Yet his breadth of vision straddled Africa as well as Telengana, Gorky as much as Bishnu Rabha.

As we gather around Hiruda on his last journey, we ponder not only about what he means to us, but also about what is the place of poets and poetry in our lives. Some believe poets must contribute to society on an elevated plane. Poets understood the power of imagination and could interpret issues with clarity. Others opine poets should challenge our thinking and stir our emotions. But no poet writes to change the world around him. Poetry cannot be mere propaganda, lines printed on flyers. Often poetry is subversive in that it is a refuge from the demands and conventions of a society. Italian poet Salvatore Quasimodo, in his Nobel lecture of 1959, said: "The politician wants men to know how to die courageously. The poet wants men to live courageously," poetry is not viewed everywhere as separate from matters of the nation. In Latin America, Jose Marti, one of the regions most beloved poets, led the movement to liberate Cuba from colonial domination. Nicaraguan poet and priest Ernesto Cardenal was in the thick of the Sandinista revolution. Nobel prize winning Chilean poet Pablo Neruda was a diplomat, senator and joined Spanish poets Federico Garcia Lorca and Miguel de Unamuno to oppose General Franco in the Spanish civil war. Lorca and Unamano paid for that with their lives. Contemporary

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middleeastern poets like Bad Shahisal Sayyab and Mahmoud Darwish have also embraced the ideal of committed literature. Through poetry, mankind learns to be human, and like Walt Whitman, everything human is of interest to the poet. Hiruda would certainly have agreed with John Lennon. "My role in society, or any artist or poets' role is to try and express what we all feel. Not to tell the people how to feel. Not as a preacher, not as a leader, but as a reflection of us all."

Young poet Anurag e-mails from Delhi: "We live in an age where the finer things of life are left to rot in the madness of our struggles. Books of poems rot in dusty shelves, everytime someone silences the voice in his head, another poem is lost. And once we stop being arrogant, once we stop being intuitive, once we stop falling prey to the hearty emotion of youth, the very impulse of poetry, of life is lost. Look out, open your windows, let the whirlwind of a lazy summer afternoon roll inside your doors. Even today, there will be poem, an epiphany to haunt you."

My friend poet, writer, artist Rupanjali Baruah shares one of Hiruda's poems that she has translated:

*The sun would not rise/ the erst bees/ flying across the patch of mustard/ stood in midair/
clutching the ends of mist... The trees by the riverside/ stiffen in the cold/ and the other trees
too/ one by one/ shed their leaves/ they gather at the patch of green beneath.../ All roads
and fields/ are places/ blanketed in grief...*

So farewell, poet of the people. We will hold on to the fragrant blossoms of your words in our cupped palms long after your butterfly wings flutter homewards.