

Imtiaz Dharker

Six Poems North and South



Six Poems North and South was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival and Manchester Art Gallery in response to the New North and South programme of exhibitions celebrating the shared heritage of South Asia and the North of England. The work was performed in the galleries on Friday 20th October as part of the 2017 Manchester Literature Festival.

Manchester Literature Festival

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The Jump

At last he comes out of his room
and his skin is webbed, his face masked

in red, but I can see where he has sewn
the pieces of polyester together,

and where he has zipped himself in.
When I squeeze this super-hero's arm

he is still my boy inside,
nothing but bone.

*Come for food, I say, khaman-dhoklas are hot,
aunties and uncles are waiting.*

*But he says, If somebody told you it was easy
to grow another skin, they lied.*

So we are in the sitting-room,
hunger rumbling, the smell of food

calling from the kitchen, watching him
jump off the sofa. He is whispering,

*Go web! Up, up and away, web!
Shazam!*

Then, knees bent to his chest,
he sails over Bolton,

Leicester, Brent, New York.
The carpet becomes a map of the world

and in front of my eyes he is owning
this other skin, crossing a line.

He is strange and beautiful,
and no longer mine.



Zikr

This line is the first breath,
this dash the last

and here, where the hand moved
back and forth, is the pulse

that lives past death
and looks like love.



The garden gnomes are on their mobile phones

Headphones on, the gnomes
will never know the sound

of the common yarrow
trying to grow.

The plumbago can hardly hear itself
think over passing buses, sirens, drills,

washing machines, tumble-dryers,
beeping tills.

The gnomes are online
or out at the shops, buying

portable speakers, voice recognition
software, high-top sneakers,

not caring if the lobelia is trying
to breathe over the harsh kiss

of pesticide and sewage
spewed out from factories.

The gnomes are busy
watching Game of Thrones,

jamming buttons on controllers,
checking their likes on mobile phones.

For the basil, time moves in slow-motion
and the gnomes are a passing blur.

The money plant and marigold
are in conversation. They remember

a time when there was water nearby
and they could sense it,

a time before cars and their fumes,
before gnomes.

The world is in the tiny hands
of those with cash hidden

under the flower-beds, or stashed
in socks.

The garden gnomes are devious.
They are singing

lullabies
to the unsuspecting phlox.



Send this

Do not send me a postcard
of the city that once lived here,
its water-courses and its domes.
No photograph can show that this
was once home, and that home
is long gone.

Do not send me a miniature
drawn with a camel's-hair brush
to hang on my wall, or tell me
you were in the Anarkali Bazaar,
or say the gulmohar trees were aflame
and koels sang there.

Everything changes. Remind me
of this when the light falls aslant
on things not quite made, girders laid
over half-drawn plans, haggled over
and paid, the truth retold and sold
in new-built malls.

With the wrong key, I come
to this place and try to unlock it.

Air-conditioners rattle and spit
at the back of suburban villas.
Someone here has built a room,
left space for a window,

opened a door, a desire.
Do not mock it. In an almost-done
world, send me this, knowing
nothing is ever fixed. I will carry
the unfinished walls of my city
with me, in my pocket.



This line, that thread

Draw a line from finger to heart.
Draw the water from well to mouth.
Place a mark where the words were said,
map the distance from north to south.

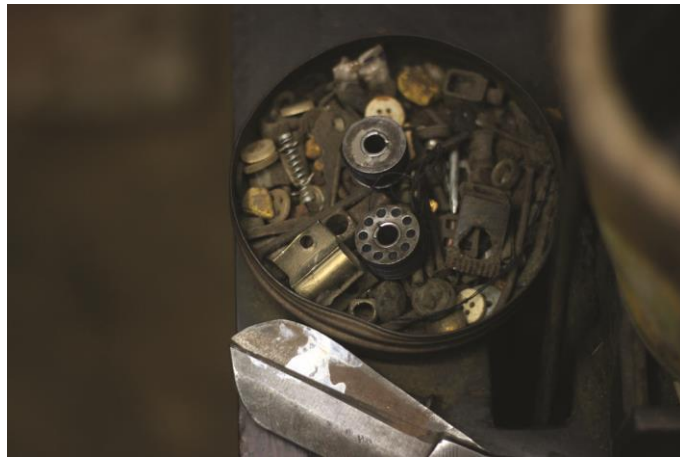
Take it apart and start again.

Look out of the window at your neighbour.
Look in the mirror at your own face.
Breathe on the glass to blur the border,
watch it become an unowned space.

Wipe it away and begin again.

Hold the end of a single thread,
loop it to others, weave it to lace.
Spread it out to see if the holes
are an imperfection or a kind of grace

with their open heart, their otherness.



Drain

What comes out of this place
is rust-coloured water, mountains of scraps
tossed away, the after-taste of excess
on the tongue, the long squirm
of it in the heart, the lurch of too much.

All this should lurk and hide, but
it is out there on show like a wedding party
with dancers, brass bands, flaunting
itself to the world. *This is how much
I can afford, it says, to throw away.*

Out with drums pounding,
tassels shaking, all the red and gold
in the world weighing down the bride
till she is on her knees, saying
Please, but not finishing, exhausted

by the whole thing, by being sold
out. Struggling out of cracks
are the hands that are too small, not
reaching up for help, not reaching,
because what is there but air,

and even that used up, drained?