

Retracing

Ribeiro

1933 - 2010



The Poet



Head of a Poet, c.1966

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A Daughter's Tribute

Marsha Ribeiro

The poems selected here, by Emily Phillips, span 60 years of my father's life. Included in her selection are some of the first poems he wrote having returned to India in 1955, following 5 years in Britain.

This was a time when thoughts of being a published poet were foremost in his mind, and his move to painting occurred almost accidentally. He told me a family relative back in Goa had said: "Let's go hunting. I said no but went with him to the hardware store where instead of buying ammunition, I bought my first tubes of oil paints and hardboard". It was the late fifties and a successful first exhibition would soon follow at the Bombay Artist Centre in 1961. From then on, his destiny as an artist took on a life of its own and took him in a direction that sometimes, he would say, felt beyond his control. He still though was writing poetry.

My father's early poems convey a deep sense of gloom and melancholy that I

still find somewhat difficult to reconcile with the spirited, fiery and passionate character I knew. He had an outlook on life – I believe inherited from his mother – that anything was possible. I have, however, come to appreciate, though his poetry and family letters, that he had, as my grandmother put it, a "most sensitive heart" from young.

It runs though 'A Sea's Edge' and again in 'A Soul's Calling', both poems he dedicated to my mother. The verses of the first were scribed on a small piece of notepaper, which had aged over the years in the tin she had kept of personal memorabilia. This was a poem she liked. When he first read 'A Soul's Calling' to her, she told me she had been at a loss to know what to say and make of its dark layers of meaning. Although she felt the honour of his having dedicated this to her.



Poet as a Visionary, 2005

I feel his lifelong aspiration to write sprang from the open house atmosphere of my grandparents' home of 'Hira Building' in a vibrant and cosmopolitan 1940s Bombay. Throughout my childhood, I heard the names of poets and artists who came and went, little realising they would become some of India's great artistic and literary figures.

I felt privileged to have been privy to their shared histories, passed on from family members to me through the years, revealing that many of these individuals were just like him, starting out and finding their feet. They had, in common, a spirit and youthful optimism and most shared the view that coming to Britain would further their creative potential. The poet, Parthasarathy, whose recollections are included here was one of them who became a lifelong and loyal friend of the family.

Although my father later wrote of his acute sense of frustration at being unable to write with the same ease with which he painted, I feel that the sensibility of the poet is woven through his life story since those early Bombay days. Despite his sense that his dream of being a poet went unrealised, what strikes me is that a poetic touch permeates through the titling of his art as in 'The Flowering of Man' or the apocalyptic 'Frolic on a Nuclear Playground' and reveals much of what preoccupied his thoughts as well as giving a sense of the era he lived through.



The Imagined 'W.S.' (The Bard) as a Young Man, 1999

Amongst his writings were feverishly-written notes which occupied every inch of free space, as if he feared an idea would vanish forever unless it was put down. Occasionally, he would find clarity, and produce a neat copy - as in the 1990s poems included here, drafts of which we would read together in his kitchen. I recall the paintings he was producing at the time closely mirrored the dreamlike intensity of the worlds he conjured up in these poems. Poetry had re-entered his life.

Emily's sensitive selection of poetry in 'Ribeiro - The Poet', combined with select paintings, reveal how his desire to create spilled off the canvas onto paper and vice versa. It was a side to him that seemed unstoppable and a memory I will always cherish.

Ribeiro Remembered

R. Parthasarathy

I first met Lance in Bombay (now Mumbai) at a poetry reading at the British Council on Homji Street in 1955 when I was an undergrad at Bombay University, and Lance worked as an agent for the Life Insurance Corporation of India. Lance had recently returned from London, where he had studied life drawing as a part-time student for two years, from 1951 to 1953, at St. Martin's School of Art. From 1955 to 1960, we would meet on Saturday afternoons at Hira Building, the home of his parents, Joao and Lilia Ribeiro, across the street from Crawford Market in downtown Bombay.



Crawford Market, c.1940s

The traffic near Crawford Market was, I remember, horrendous. Street noises would travel three storeys up to the living room where we talked, often joined in by Lance's sister Marina, who was a flight attendant with Air India.

Lance and I would read each other's poems aloud and talk about them for



Ribeiro and his cousin Joy c. 1960s

hours. He was a good judge of poetry with an unerring instinct for the finer nuances of language... Lance was enthusiastic about Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-89). He would often recite the first stanza of "The Wreck of



Crawford Market, c.1940s

the Deutschland" (1876) in his rich booming voice. I could tell that he was interested in the sound of poetry, and this aspect came to characterize his own poems...Lance's voice will always remain with me. It was deep-throated and sensuous. He could have been a singer had he wished to. When he talked, you listened. He spoke with

authority on a wide range of subjects. But Goa remained the epicenter of his consciousness.

Both of us were in our early twenties and hoped to be published poets some day (a feat I accomplished in 1977). However in 1959, Lance abandoned poetry for painting. I record this event in the poem "Portrait of a Friend as an Artist," which appeared ten years later in London Magazine, edited by the poet Alan Ross.

*He too was a poet till he gave up,
one day, blowing rings of poems.
Now paints are his cup of tea, often
laced with the thin sugar of Goan*

*memories: churches with inoffensive
bells in their loins, shoulders
lopped off, epaulettes and all,
stone-blind in the eyes, and strutting*

*crosses on every hill (skulls, or
whatever remains, of Catholic Europe)
that stare at you all over. From
Belsize Park he writes tenderly*

*of the brown weekends of our youth
in Bombay. Arrogance was second
nature to him, something we shared
in common. And a love of words.*

I learned from Lance's daughter Marsha that Lance treasured this poem. P. L. Brent had included the poem in his anthology, *Young Commonwealth Poets '65*, and I had sent Lance a copy of the book. "Lance would carry the book...and very quietly, unassumingly and touchingly show it (the poem) to friends, especially in the last years of his life."

After he took to painting, he wrote only occasionally. The poems, both finished and unfinished, that are included here were found among his papers.

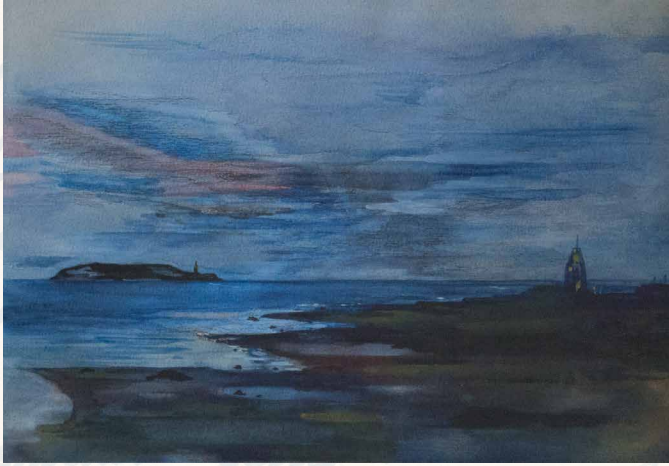
"The Risen Voice" is a representative poem. With a characteristic metaphysical tone, it explores states of consciousness that border on the religious. Religious imagery similarly dominates "A Soul's Calling," especially in its invocation of the Word. Lance has a gift for the memorable phrase: "Must I abide this casuistry/Of a season and era..."

Lance's finest work is from the 1950s and 1960s. Once painting entered his life, the voice of the poet was muffled.



Urban Landscape, 12-foot Tata mural, Bombay House, 1961 (©Tata)

AT THE SEAS EDGE



Untitled, c.1970s

1

AT THE SEA'S EDGE (For Ana Rita)

She sits and gazes out to sea,
With a slow watch counts each wave.
And what it leaves beside the shore
Are hers to pearl, to piece and save.

These splendid gems, each a story tell
Of shipwrecked boxes they've mingled with.
The toss and snarl of death that came
So sudden - to end their tale of joy or grief.

Tired - a while she shut her eyes
And as she did, among her shells let fall a tear.
These, that know the ocean tales,
Now know her heart was all in prayer.

c.1959

THE RISEN VOICE:



Untitled, 1965

2

THE RISEN VOICE

The Light will give nothing without the Dark.

It was the Dark

And then:

“Let there be Light”

After ...

Upon this dark stair within your mind,

With no rail to hold

Set down your soul,

With eye wide open.

And you shall fall,

Unseeing.

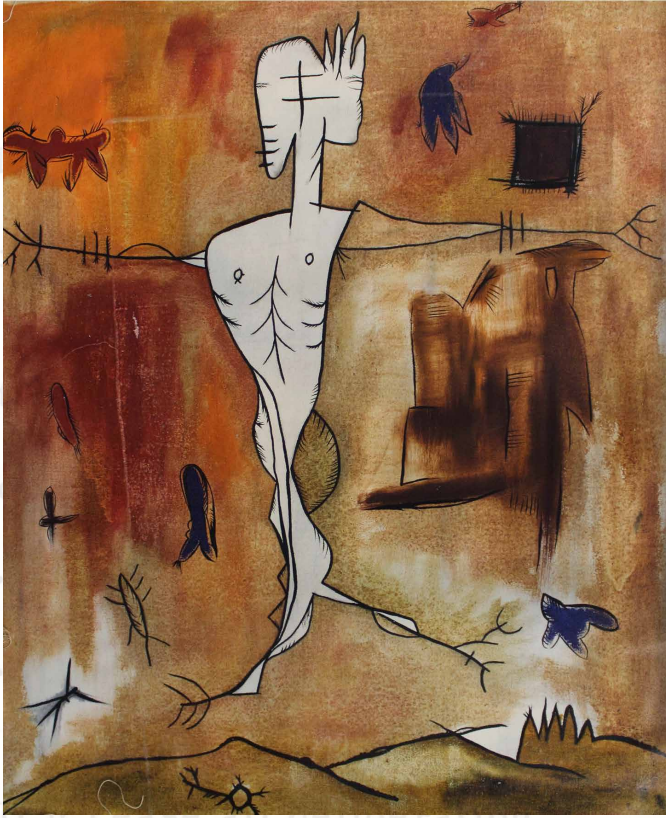
As I am falling.

To no Kingdom,

And no Dying.

c.1960s

A SOUL'S CALLING (For Annarita)



Untitled (Religious Painting), c. 1965

3

A SOUL'S CALLING (For Ana Rita)

And then,

No realm further than that of the Dark?

Is it the dark that ends all purpose?

Shadow that leads and follows

During the time of day?

Perhaps, for time alone.

Leaving an apocryphal code.

Must I abide this casuistry

Of a season and era,
Shall it cease all deliberation?

The customary soul for good or evil

That tosses creed and belief

That does the body, by the gnawing worm.

To have been, and done.
To the sea of myth and fancy;
And now, to be undone?

And lays our carcass by the hill
Time our betrayer!

Leaving an apocryphal code.

To which we affix suitable labels

Must I abide this casuistry
Roll the tombstone of antiquity aside!
Of a season and era,

That tosses creed and belief

Arise! To the sea of myth and fancy? the vastness of Dark

And lays our carcass by the hill

Bring forth thy word from mummy kings
To which we affix suitable labels.

Roll the tombstone of antiquity aside!

Arise! The voice from the vastness of Dark

Bring forth thy word from mummy kings

Wrapped.

Unwind and spiral

Unwind and spiral

Through hollow centuries.

Through hollow centuries.

A voice emerges from the catacomb of the mind.

c.1960s

A voice emerges from the catacomb of the mi

4

CIPHER

Art is an activity.

It need not be

But it is.

Not different,

From matter of being

Does it matter?

It is with

And without

A function.

It makes a statement if you wish it to

But is it there?

Without,

What no title?

How shall I know

What it's all about?

Without one

It's not the same.

Not there to please,

Or displease.

To make,

Or unmake.

A feeling,

In a corner,

On a wall.

In suspension,

Not there

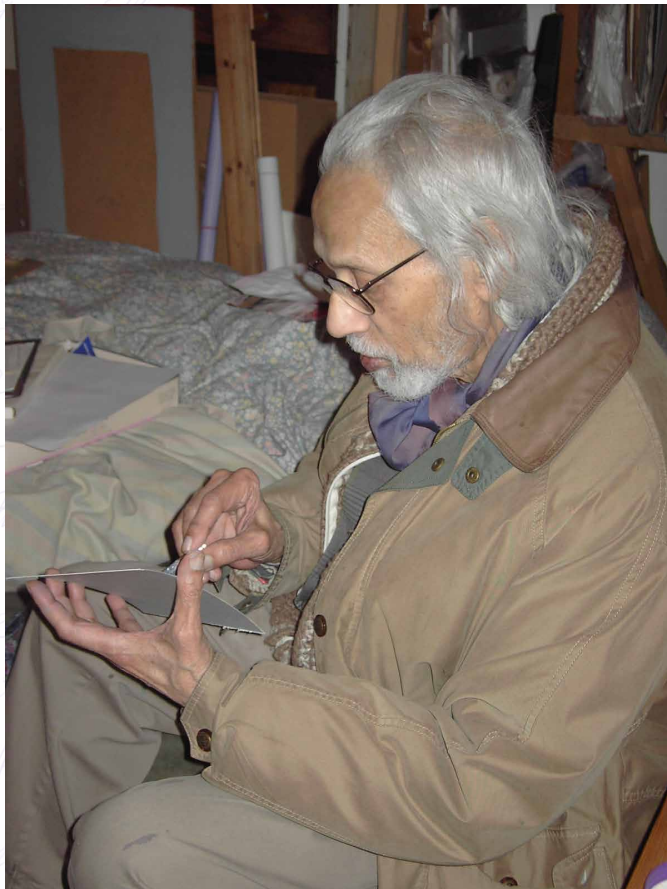
For me,

For you.

CIPHER

Not for the frills
Or pretensions
Of the few.
Who tell us things
They think
We wish to know.
Facile descriptions
To unlock a smile
That was never there

c.1994



Ribeiro at work, 2010

5

UPON A TIME

Outlived my joy and love
(Thought it would never end)

Now the flip-side of pain
And enduring grief
Comes like a thief
Taking even the shade of memory
To lie by the shadow
I cannot grasp

I could go on
And on, and on
Even the bromide bites
Into the image
And it's gone
The grief and pain abides

Did I give myself willingly
To count these unenduring days?
Dark, shadowy days
As with the night

Love, a battered toy
No joy left
In the attic
Discarded
Among other loves

To remember
Is to recount
Uneven
Dishevelled tales
Of everywhere
Neither here
Nor there
But once upon a time

December 1993



Drugged Man, c.1960s



Bridge at Sunset, 1967

6

EVANESCENT

Of you before
departure -
your presence
in my senses
lick the salt
of substance
to hold you longer.

And now absence
gravitating blues
as balls of iron
extrude anchors
through hurting loins
weighted down
under a heavy sky.

And now absence.

If it but rained
to soothe the strain of thinking
of you before
departure -
your presence
in my senses.

And now absence.

Gravitating thoughts
as flash of lights
turns thunder
but no rain
to temper my steel
turned inward -
pain holds my flight
of fancy
in delight - again
licking the salt
of substance
to hold you longer.

gravitating thought
in flash of lights
turns thunder
but no rain
to temper my steel
turned inward -
your presence
in my senses
* pain holds flight
from fancy -
again
licking the salt
of substance
to hold you longer

Undated

7

FLOWER

To feel the Grey
The Sky, the Rain
The Changing Day
The Light, the Warmth, the Sun.

Flower that would Bloom,
In your Windblown Hair.

Are these "Absurdities"
That will not touch the Heart in Pain,
The run of Tears
Forever tracing lines
To map a Face
Of unrequited Love?

Must they be
So pointless now
Except for the new
Heart, in Joy?
The First Heart
Beaten to the Stone?

My love will not change,
Or ever be pointless
"Absurdity" for me
I wish you well
My forever,
My One,
My Only
Flower of my Life.

June 1994

Must they be
So pointless now,

Even

Hea

The

Bea

My

Or

Abso

I wo

My

My One.

My Only

Flower of my life.



The Flowering of Man, 1998

Things

8 UNTITLED

Stars, Pulsars, Galaxies, Quasars

Mantles of gaseous dust

Outer reaches

Streaming

Churning

Spirals Spheres

Sucked through holes of night

Suns

Energised to a fist

Implosions

Explosions

Pulsations,

Convulsing the Heart

On its second beat.

Thought of you

Thought of departure

Thought of return.

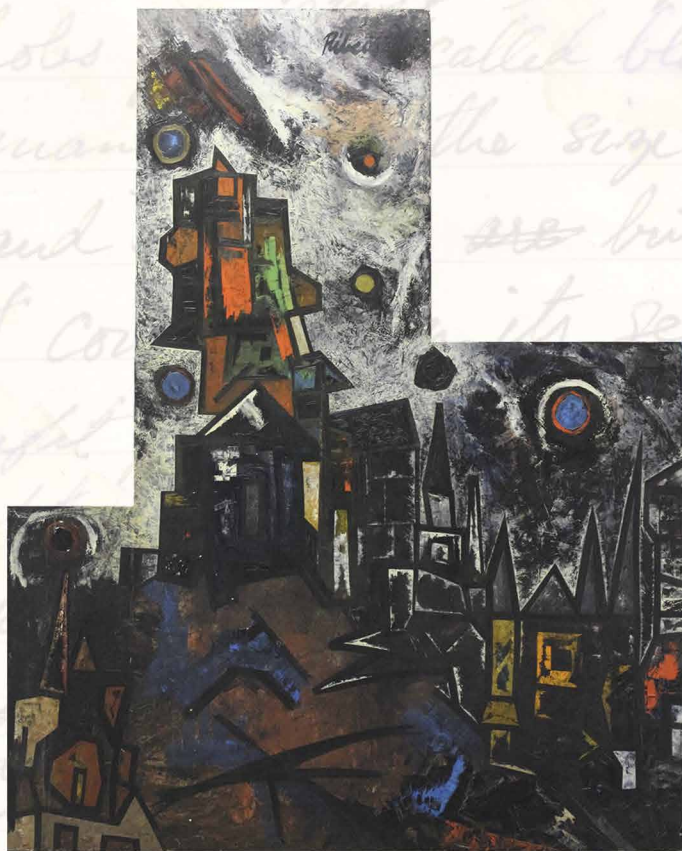
Now, here

Thought

Thought

Fists, Black Holes.

Undated



Untitled, 1965

9

UNTITLED (an unfinished poem)

Wishing wells
Our childlike days began
The echo sound
Circles and bells and pools
To rhyming and singing
Feet ahead to the flow of the beat

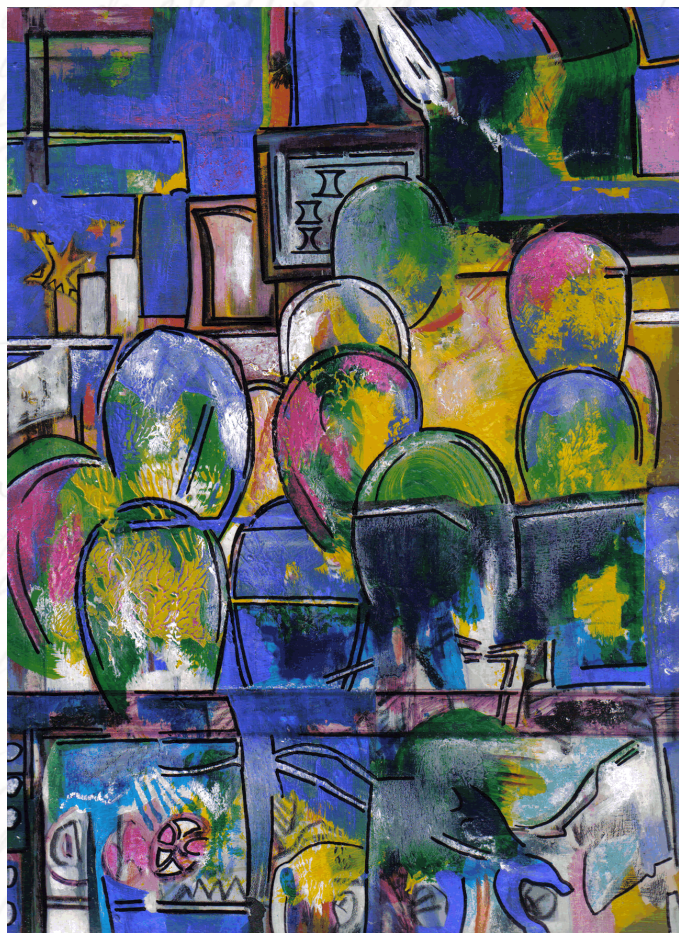
Rise and fall
To the laughter
And the smile
And the missing teeth
Past the diminishing hour

We stay, the play
Will not end
If you and I
Had our way
But the drum began to beat
Unrelenting the role

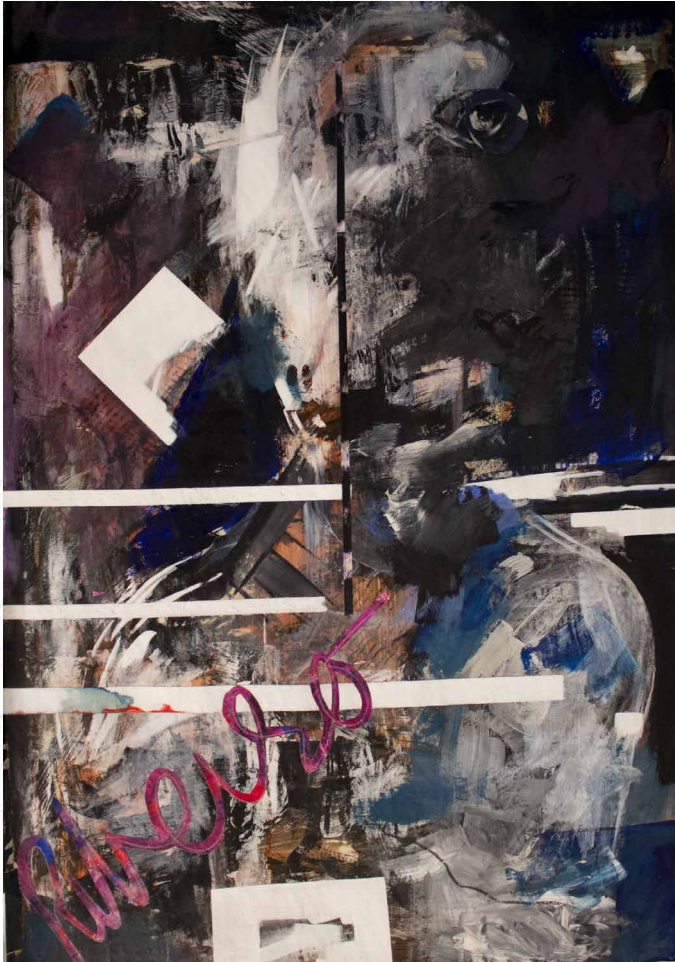
The hour chimes
Time, time
The echo sound
And the years move on
Leaves its source
A moment

To resonate and return
And so on the turn of another year.

Undated



The Classroom, 1990



Witness the Signing and the Design (not signed), 1997

10 DREAMSTORM

As night follows day
The tumult of the dreamstorm begins.
Night after night
The unrelenting
Ceaseless dreaming began.
Not where it left off the night before.

Even if it had,
The new form it would take
Would not know what its form had been.
Today, yesterday,
The day before.
It would be the same.
The same again tomorrow.
The dream,
The dream,
The dream,
The dream.
The Hell lay in that dream.
Erosion in the brain.
Repetitions numbing.
The dream unceasing.
Hammered and fell,
Lashed and swayed.
The walls of the membrane.
That amorphous structure
Once with shape and form
Is now the cauldron
Of the dream.
Somnambulant space
Etched to conform
To the shape of the dream.
Yet the dream
Is without form.
It could begin
At the end,
It could begin
At the middle,
It could begin



Frolic on a nuclear playground, 1965

At the beginning.
 For the moment,
 It takes the shape
 Of the cauldron,
 It has shaped;
 With attendant gods
 Demons homunculi.
 A wailing stream.
 Wailing, streaming
 In the vaporous
 Bed of the dream.
 Streaming procession.
 Undecipherable order.
 Gods, professing omniscience
 Demons, their power, strength.
 Little creatures, nameless,
 Of endless species
 With homunculi
 Streaming, useless.
 Showing purpose,

Seemingly, beyond grasp.
Reading, lurching
Here, there, everywhere.
Direction, in flux.
Within the shaping cauldron
Held together.
Centrifugal procession,
Trying to conform,
Mantra, mumbles on.
Point of arrival,
Point of departure,
Point of uselessness,
In this circular transcript.
It begins, it ends,
Falling, rising
Within walls.
Dreamstorm begins
As night follows day.

1994



Juggernaut City, 1968

Letter from F.N. Souza to Ribeiro

7 Belsize Sq
London NW3

19-11-59

My dear Lancy:

Thanks very much for your letter—and for your poems. I like them ~~immensely~~. I enjoyed reading them and two or three of them, especially the crucifixion ones I found very moving. I'm not happy about some of the adjectives used and many of them are superfluous. The image, also, at times softens and tends to fade out. But on the whole the poetic effect is very good. I'm not very good at this so I want to get them read by ^{some} one who has a sense for good poetry with a view ~~for~~ to publishing publication. Let us see.

I've been extremely busy. All I can think of is in terms of paint. My flair for writing has vanished. I read very little. I've read Dr Thivago. Very good. There are some excellent poems at the end ^{of the book} (would you like me to send you some books you fancy?)

I wonder if you could send me the

cutting of the Goan newspaper Marina wrote
about - the one with John Coplans. He is ^{also} eager
to see it. There are five paintings of mine to be or being
shown in Delhi. They were flown there. I am keen to know how *

Please see that my work, particularly
the watercolours and drawings are not eaten
by insects, or discoloured by the tropical climate.
I think they ought to be wrapped in brown
paper, sprinkled with D.D.T. powder and
~~kept~~ kept in a dark place. Within a few years
they'll be valuable, as my work now has
considerably increased in price.

Love and best of everything to
you, Marina, Mummy & Uncle

Yours

Jonnie

*they will be received by the
critics. If you hear anything
let me know.

Letter from R. Parthasarathy to Ribeiro

Leeds

19 January

Dear Lancy,

Am sending for you to tear to pieces Section I of the proposed sequel to the Waste Land. The all-important talks we had together in London on the state of England have, I am afraid, invaded the poem.

A word about the last line. It's from Milton's *Areopagitica* and the passage is well-known:

'Nethinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant Nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks.'

It's ironically linked up with Victoria (ie England) to end the section.

Any other puzzle in the poem I leave you to unravel, now that you have the leisure.

me dedication is not accidental. I wanted
a poem worthy of you and our friendship.
I believe this is it.

Regards to Anahita. How's the little one?

Any luck with the MS?

Yours,

Partha

departure -
your presence

in my bones
like the salt of substance held upon bones

Acknowledgements

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We hope you find this resource useful to your experience and study of Lancelot Ribeiro and Indian poetry.

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Poems © Marsha Ribeiro

Photographs © Marsha Ribeiro

Portrait of a Friend as an Artist © R. Parthasarathy

Urban Landscape, 12-foot Tata mural, Bombay House, 1961 © Tata

Resources:

- Retracing Ribeiro website: www.retracingribeiro.co.uk
- Retracing Ribeiro Educational Resource Pack (available on the Retracing Ribeiro website)
- Retracing Ribeiro, *The Artist's Torment* (available on the Retracing Ribeiro website)
- Retracing Ribeiro film (available on the Retracing Ribeiro website)
- *Lancelot Ribeiro, An Artist in India and Europe* written by David Buckman, published by Francis Boutle Publishers
- *Restless Ribeiro, An Indian Artist in Britain* published and distributed by River Books Co. Ltd.



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