AGAINST THE STATE
LEELADHAR JAGOORI’S 1970S POETRY

LEELADHAR JAGOORI
(b. 1940) is one of the leading Hindi poets of postcolonial India. Jagoori is a free-verse poet, and his poetic genres range from lyric poems, symbolist poems, surrealist poems, socially engaged narrative poems that speak to historical Indian social divisions and forms of oppression, to reformulations of Hindu myths within a contemporary setting. His poetry has won the top literary and cultural awards in India, including the Sahitya Akademi Prize (1997), the Padma Shri (2004), and more recently the KK Birla Foundation’s Vyas Saman (2018). He has published between fifteen and twenty books of poetry. He lives in the foothills of the Himalayas in Dehradun in his home state of Uttarakhand.

Translated from the Hindi by MATT Reeck
night—like a rag
in the jaws of a cow
slowly disappearing
at its end a shiny button

then in the sky above our village
suddenly a crack opened
and light from the road hit the village
it was a police car

but the light wasn't so bright
that in the drowned darkness
within the darkness
you could make out eyes
hands or feet
बलदेव खटिक

रात, चिथड़ा खाती गाय के जबड़े में
धीरे-धीरे गायब हो रही थी
यह उसका अंतिम छोर था
जिस पर एक बटन चमक रहा था

तभी हमारे गांव के आकाश में
अचानक लोगों ने एक दरार देखी
सड़क से गांव पर रोशनी फेंकती
यह पुलिस की गाड़ी थी

लेकिन यह इतना पैना उजाला नहीं था
कि अँधेरे के भीतर दुबके अँधेरे में
कुछ आँखें, कुछ हाथ, कुछ पाँव चमक उठे
screaming and shouting
they descended from the road
running in the direction of Rangtu's house
their firm, steady strides made us feel
how backward our village was
even our dogs didn't recognize their uniforms

our dogs would attack anyone
who wasn't wearing rags
these were the dogs of the poor villagers
the enemies of city fashion
the four pairs of police boots
didn't smell like the hides of water buffaloes
the policemen in a row
their feet rising and falling steadily
like water in a fountain

because on occasions like these
you have to put to use
whatever you have
and so the dogs were barking

now they had an arrest warrant for Rangtu
who had been looting rations
last night his family stuffed themselves
desperate for anything they could get their hands on
for one night an ordinary house in our country
was made into a pleasure palace
वे भड़भड़कर उतरे
और रंगतू के घर की ओर दौड़े
उनकी देरुस्त और निर्विश्वसनीय दौड़ बताती थी
कि हमारे गांव की चल ख़राब हो गयी है
उनकी पोशाक

हमारे गांव के कुत्तों तक के लिए
अपरिचित थी

जिसके विशेष न पहने हुए हों
हमारे गांव की गरीब जनता के कुत्ते हैं
सभ्य और अजनबी पोशाकों के दुश्मन
लेकिन चार जोड़ी
पुलिस के बूटों में
उनहें बैल के चमड़े की गंध नहीं आ रही थी
उनके पुलिसपरेट
एक लाइन में
जैसे जलओद उछल रहे थे

क्योंकि ऐसे मौक़े पर
जो जिसके पास है
उसका उपयोग जरूरी हो जाता है
इसलिए कुछ भींक रहे थे

जो रंगतू
कल राशन लूटने में शरीक था
उनके पास उसके नाम का वारणट
उसके परिवार ने सा भरपेट खाया है
(but even to call it a house is wrong
it wasn't as good as that)

up to this point
they were still dreaming their pleasant dreams

the officers drew up their strength
and kicked Rangtu awake
they immediately cuffed him
(his hands fastened together
like plaster on the side of a building)
took what of the grain remained
then took him to the city
where there are the proper facilities
for jailing a man and performing his postmortem

the villagers were staring at the police
so Rangtu's naked wife
couldn't come outside
inside
her kids clung to her
like clothes

then morning was shuddering
on the car's engine
in the darkness drowned within the darkness
and Rangtu
who had been fighting for his wife and kids
भूख-भर अन्न के नशे में
अपने देश का एक मामूली घर भी
आरामगाह बना हुआ है
(वैसे उसे घर कहना थी)
खामोखा जिन्हें घर कहते हैं
उनकी बढ़िया छतों पर घास उगा देना है)
करीब-करीब अपनी इच्छाओं की मुद्री खोलकर
इस समय तक वे सोये हुए हैं
अपनी लात में ताकत पैदा करके
उन्होंने उसे बूट से उठाया
और तूरंत उसके हाथ बांध दिये
(वे हाथ जो बड़ी-बड़ी इमारतों पर
पलस्तर की तरह चिपके हुए हैं)
फिर थोड़ा चले आनाज के साथ
उन्होंने शहर ले गये
जहाँ आदमी के लिए
जेल और पोस्टमार्टम की पूरी व्यवस्था है
पुलिसवालों पर आदमियों की आँखें थीं
इसलिए संगतू की नंगी ओऱल
बाहर नहीं आ रही
लेकिन भीतर
बचे उसके शरीर से पहनावे की तरह चिपके हुए थे
यह सुबह थी
गाड़ी के इंजन पर धर्धराती हुई
अँधेरे के भीतर दुबके हुए अँधेरे में
was riding for “free” in a car for the first time

during the years
when Vanaspati meant only a tub of ghee
and there wasn’t a single word
that stood sharp and ready for the day

“lentils” and “rice” are words
“bread” and “spinach” are words
no, no—words aren’t such important things
words are just flecks of salt on bread
words cause your mouth to water
now where can you find words
that can be sworn statements
that can provide testimony?

in the car on the way to the police station
his mute soul is like a leafless tree
on whose branches thousands of buds will open
inside thousands of red buds the leaves
that will burst forth in prickly heat
his entire body will erupt in words
and speaking with a thousand tongues
he will give them what they want

holding onto his roots
descending into his soil
Rangtu isn’t a tree or a leaf or the wind
बीबी-बच्चों के लिए लड़ता हुए संगतू।
पहली बार गाड़ी पर “फ्री” चढ़ रहा था।

यह एक ऐसा वक्त था
जब वनस्पति
केवल धी के डिब्बे का मतलब था
और कहीं भी कोई शब्द अपनी क्रीज़ में नहीं था।

शब्द जो कि दाल और भट हैं
शब्द जो कि रोटी और साग हैं
नहीं-नहीं, शब्द इतनी बड़ी चीज़ नहीं है
शब्द केवल रोटी पर रखे हुए नमक के कण हैं
शब्द जो लार बनाते हैं
इस वक्त कहाँ से लाये जायें ऐसे शब्द
जो हलफनामा बन सकें
जो तरफदारी कर सकें।

पुलिस की गाड़ी में उसकी शब्दहीन आत्मा
एक नंगे पेड़ की तरह है
जिस पर धाने पहुंचने से पहले
कई हजार घमोरियां फूट पड़ीं
कई हजार लाल घमोरियां में बंद पत्ते
निशान की तरह बाहर उभर आएंगे
भाषा अचानक सारे शरीर में फल पड़ें
और कई हजार जीभों से बोलता हुआ
वह बरी हो जायेगा।
not even an insect of the darkness drowning in the darkness
not even a word

Rangtu is one man's pain
because when alone one man is a criminal
when alone one man full of questions
is an accident waiting to happen

at the station
while getting out of the police car
Rangtu felt like an important person for a second
the driver opened the back gate
and he jumped out like cops do

then one police officer
(the one who had been smoking bidis during the whole way)
was handed a cable from home
saying his mom was sick
but he was on duty until the evening

while the official charge sheet was being drawn up
the police officer led Rangtu by a rope
from one room to another
after three glasses of chai
and 52-paise worth of bidis
when it was time to lower the flag in the evening
Rangtu was assigned a blanket, cell, and number
(while in the crumpled-up cable in his pocket
अपनी जड़ों के सहारे
अपनी मिढी में उतरा हुआ रंगतू
न पेड़ है। न पत्ता है। न हवा है
अँधेरे के भीतर दबका हुआ अँधेरे का कीड़ा भी नहीं
शब्द भी नहीं

रंगतू एक अकेले आदमी का दर्द है
और अकेला आदमी अपराधी होता है
सवालों के जत्थों से भर हुआ अकेला आदमी
एक दुर्घटना होता है

थाने पहुँचते ही
गाड़ी से उतरते हुए रंगतू ने
ठोस देर के लिए खुद को बड़ा आदमी महसूस किया
झाड़वर ने गाड़ी का डाला खोला
और वह सिपाहियों की ही तरह कूदता हुआ
जमीन पर खड़ा हो गया

तभी एक सिपाही को (जो रस्ते-भर बीड़ी पीता रहा)
घर से आया हुआ तर दिया गया
तार पर उसकी माँ बीमार थी
लेकिन उसे शाम तक छुट्टी नहीं मिली

पक्का “जेल आइए” बनवाने तक
वह रंगतू को, रस्सा पकड़े हुए
एक कमरे से दूसरे कमरे में ले जाता रहा
तीन मिलास चाय
the officer’s mom was writhing)

three days later
when the cop got back to his village
his mom was barely hanging on
like a drop of water
dangling from the tip of a needle

he ran straight to the district hospital
to ask to use the broken-down ambulance
parked in the hemp plants
a thornapple bush growing from its engine block

amid the hospital’s dead
he wracked his brains
finally he thought of something
and he set off running for the nearby police station

because today simply being human
isn’t good enough
he told them he was also a cop
please give me a police car
so I can take my mom to the hospital

they said
police vehicles are for catching criminals
die at home or the hospital
die on the street or the cremation ghat
और बावन पैसे की बीड़ी के धोरे पहुँचने के बाद 
जिस समय झण्डा उतरने का गाजर बज रहा था 
उस समय रंगतू को कमबल, कोठरी और नंबर मिल रहा था 
(लेकिन सिपाही की माँ 
जेब में मुड़े हुए तार पर छटपटा रही थी)

जब तीसरे दिन छुट्टी पर 
वह अपने गांव पहुँचा तो उसकी माँ 
सुई की नोक पर 
अभी झड़ पड़नेवाली 
पानी की बूंद की तरह इंतज़ार कर रही थी

वह भागा-भागा जिला अस्पताल गया 
एम्बुलेंस मांगी 
भाग के पासों के बीच जो खराब खड़ी थी 
धूल जिसके इंजन से बाद हो गया था

कई पुरानी लाशों को लांघते हुए 
उसने चारों ओर अपना दिमाग दौड़ाया 
और जब बड़ी मुश्किल से एक विचार 
उसकी पकड़ में आया 
तो वह लपककर पास ही थाने में गया

क्योंकि आजकल केवल आदमी होना 
न्यायसंगत नहीं है 
इसलिए उसने बताया कि मैं भी पुलिस विभाग का 
आदमी हूँ 
माँ को अस्पताल लाने के लिए 
थोड़ा पुलिसगाड़ी दे दीजिए
wherever you die it’s still not a crime

add to that
since there’s no warrant out for your mom
we can’t send a car
after all who can stop people bent on dying
we even see it in the station a lot

when he got back home that evening
medicine and pills in hand
his mom was already dead
fleeing from the world like this saves us from what crime?

in this true-to-life tale of deprivation
is this how we are freed from our suffering?

while on extended leave
he sent his mom off to heaven
then returned to the Bijnor Police Station

he didn’t want to show his emotions
but his future
was quietly slipping away
he kept silent about how upset the funeral had made him
he shaved his head to show his grief
he looked like someone in a gangster film

when film directors want scenes with gangsters and guns
उन्होंने कहा
पुलिस की गाड़ी अपराधियों को पकड़ने के लिए है
घर पर मारो या अस्पताल में मारो
सड़क पर मारो या शमशानघाट पर पहुंचकर मारो
मरना कहीं भी अपराध नहीं है

और फिर तुम्हारी माँ का
हमारे पास कोई वारण्ड नहीं जो हम गाड़ी भेज दें
आखिर मरनेवाले को कौन फकड़ सकता है
अक्सर हमारे पकड़े हुए भी मर जाते हैं

जब शाम को एक दवा की शीशी और कुछ गोलियां लेकर
वह घर आया
तो उसने अपनी माँ को मरा हुआ पाया
संसार से यह फरारी किस अपराध से बचती है?

अभावों की इस आज़ाद कहानी में
क्या इसी तरह होती है मुक्त?

आखिर बढ़ाई हुई छुट्टियों में
जब उसने अपनी माँ को स्वर्ग पहुंचा दिया
तब वह फिर थाना बिजनौर में लौट आया

वह विरत होना चाहता था
लेकिन अपना भविष्य उसे
भीतर-ही-भीतर ठग रहा था
कर्मकाण्ड की साड़ी कमजोरी को ढकता हुआ
उसका उस्तरफिशा सर
they gussy up actors to make them look like normal people

now let's go back
to the Bijnor Police Station
where that police officer with his shaven head
is stationed on guard duty

he's wearing a bullet-proof vest
he's carrying a rifle
he doesn't know who he's guarding
(I think he's just pacing back and forth)

is he protecting someone against the unjust world?
is he saving the country from going to ruin?
inside a room
his commanding officer
is seated
stained teeth showing his years
his hands gathered on top of the logbook
make it look like he's holding up the city

a battered and bruised man screams . . .
my wallet was stolen
my girl's photo is in there
they'll rape her
they'll beat her
look, look at my wounds
my pain
किसी फिल्मी गुंडे का सर लग रहा था

फिल्मवालों को जब गुंडे और हत्यारे
दिखाने होते हैं
तो वे आभिनेता पर आम आदमी को मेकप कर देते हैं

बात दूसरी ओर चली जायेगी
क्योंकि इस बात को कान और जुबान की तलाश है
इसलिए में आपको
फिर से धारा बिजनौर ले चलता हूँ
जहाँ अपना घुटा हुआ सिर लेकर
वह सिपाही इस समय संतरी-डूंगूटी पर है

उसकी छाती पर गोलियों का पट्टा है
उसके हाथ में एक बंदूक है
उसे नहीं मालूम वह किसकी रक्षा कर रहा है
(मेरी समझ से वह केवल टहल रहा है)

क्या वह संसार की अपराध से रक्षा कर रहा है
क्या वह इस देश को बिगड़ने से बचा रहा है
भीतर एक कमरे में
अपने गंदे लेकिन वरिष्ठ डेंटन को लेकर
दीवान बैठा है
राजनाम्यों पर हाथ रखे हुए
जैसे वह शहर की पीठ हो

एक मर खाया हुआ आदमी चिंचियाता है
मेरा ब्रुआ छिन गया
record my pain in your silly book!

with his lips
breathing life back into the dead day
the commanding officer says
what pen should I use? the silver one?
the gold one? the wood one?

the battered and bruised man sobs
use the pen of justice!

the commanding officer says
the pen of justice is the wooden one
come back tomorrow
bring your witness too
and get a doctor to write a note
saying how you've been beaten up . . .

outside Baldev Khatik is on guard duty
his head shaved for
his mom who died without ever getting medicine
he's listening to everything inside
(he corrects the police station's big clock
and steps outside the clock-gate)


to the crows in the neem tree
suddenly Baldev Khatik says quiet!
but they don't stop
उसमें मेरी लड़की का फोटो भी था
वे उससे बलात्कार करेंगे
वे उसे मार डालेंगे
देखिए, मुझे कितनी चोटें आयी है
मेरा दर्द---दर्ज करो
इस मटीले कागज पर मेरा दर्द---दर्ज करो

अपने हौंठों पर मुर्दा दिन को जिंदा करते हुए
दीवान कहता है
किस कलम से करूँ?
चाँदी की कलम से करूँ?
सोने की कलम से करूँ?
की लकड़ी को कलम से करूँ?

मार खाया हुआ आदमी रिरियाता है
कि कानून की कलम से करो
कानून की कलम लड़की की होती है
दीवान कहता है---कल आना
मार अपना गबाह भी साथ लाना
और किसी डॉक्टर से यह भी लिखवा लाना
कि तुमने मार खायी---ही---खायी है . . .

बहार संतरी---बबूटी पर खड़ा बलदेव खटिक
जिसका सिर मुंडा हुआ है
जिसकी माँ बिना दवाई के मर गयी थी
सब सुन रहा है
(थाने की बड़ी कड़ी सुधाकर
घड़ीसाज फाटक से बाहर जा रहा है)
and so he fires his rifle
he smashes its butt against the police station wall
it breaks
and he races down the stairs
steps over the dead crows
and flees amid the lengthening shadows of the evening

(just then inside the movie theater
next to the police station there was an actor
falling in love)

he was a guard up till now
now he's Baldev Khatik
he yelled this job can go fuck itself!
and crying mom! mom! mom!
he came straight
to our village

he isn't wearing a hat
his shirt is no longer tucked into his police shorts
he asks every woman what's wrong? are you sick?
let's walk to the hospital
the car's broken down

he tells all the kids
bring my wooden pen
I'll bring you justice
अचानक सामने खड़े नीम के पेड़ पर
उतरते शाम के कौवों से बलदेव खटिक कहता है
—"थम"
मगर वे नहीं रुकते
वह धड़धड़ फायर करता है
बंदूक के बट तीन जो दीवार से मारकर
tोड़ देता है
और सीढ़ियां उतरकर
sड़क पर मरे हुए कौवों को लांघकर
फरार हो जाता है

(थाने की बगल में उस समय सिनेमाघर के भीतर
पर्दे पर एक एक्टर प्यार कर रहा था )

अब तक वह संतरी था
अब वह बलदेव खटिक है
'माँ की चूत इस नौकरी की कह कर वह
माँ, माँ, माँ चिट्ठियां हुआ
sीधा हमारे गांव में घुस आया

उसके सर पर टोपी नहीं हैं
कमीज हाफेपैंस से बाहर आ गयी है
वह हरेक औरत से पूछता है तुमको क्या बीमारी है ?
अस्पताल तक पेदल चलो। गाढ़ी खराब है

बच्चों से कहता है लाओ मेरी लकड़ी का कलम
में फैसला लिख दूँ
without caring about anyone's illness
without stopping for a second anywhere
without bringing any justice
he came running
and collapsed unconscious
in Rangtu's hut

(the hut's door was open
Rangtu had been put in jail for stealing rations
and his wife and kids weren't there
although no one had seen them leave
from inside a sleepy dog
with its tail tucked between its legs
came out and turned into the next alley)

it's almost dawn
but night is still present
night will remain
even while everyone is watching the afternoon end

every house will be wrapped in its own pain
it is almost night
which cracks open doors just a bit wider
and in the clamor of the birds and the crows and the dogs
the leaves are about to start trembling . . .

then above our village
suddenly people saw something
किसी की बीमारी सुने बगैर
किसी के पास एक क्षण रुके बगैर
kिसी को कोई फैसला दिए बगैर
vह दौड़ता हुआ आया
और संगतू की झोपड़ी में
बेहोश होकर गिर पड़ा
(झौंपड़ी का देरवाज़ा खुला हुआ था
संगतू राशनवाले मामले में जेल चला गया था
और उसकी औरत भी बच्चों समेत
वहां नहीं थी
भाग किसी ने भी उन्हें कहीं जाते नहीं देखा था
भीतर से नींद में पूंछ झुकाये हुए
eकुछ निकला और अगली गली में मुड़ गया)

सुबह होनेवाली है
लेकिन रात अब भी मौजूद है
रात उस वक्त भी मौजूद रहेगी
जब लोग दोपहर को ढलते हुए देख रहे होंगे

हर घर को अपने दर्द में लपेटती
दरवाज़े की संधियां को थोड़ा और चोंडा करती हुई
रात व्यावहारिक है
विषयों और कौद्दों और कुत्तों के सामूहिक शोर में
पत्तियां धरकर रहनेवाली हैं ... 

तभी हमारे गांव के आकाश में
अचानक लोगों ने एक दरार देखी
सबसे से रोशनी फेंकती हुई
फिर यह पुलिस की गाड़ी थी
a light appeared on the road
it was a police car

morning came on in a shower of embers
and amid the barking of crazed dogs
they descended from the road smoking bidis
hardened by their lot
their plain faces
telling the stories of household abuse
of kids shitting down their legs
of blisters
of water simmering on the stove
of the steam of cooked rice

they descended from the road to Rangtu's hut
where they cuffed the crazy police officer
and took off his police uniform
before taking him away
because the government isn't crazy
the government isn't a criminal

it's another matter that since then
for the common man
all “government” means
is handcuffs and punishment

they put him in cuffs
and turned him into an ordinary person
राख की तरह झरती सुबह में
चमकती हुई कुत्तों की भौंक के बीच
बीड़ी पीते हुए वे उतरे
संबंधों की वीरानगी में

उनके साधारण चहरों पर
घरेलु थपेड़ों की गहरी शिनाख्त है
टटी फिरते हुए बचे हैं। फोड़े हैं
चूहे पर चढ़ा हुआ खदबदाता पानी है
भात के भपारे हैं

वे उतरे और रंगतू की झोपड़ी से
उस पागल सिपाही को बांधकर ले गये
पहले उन्होंने उसके सरकारी कपड़े उतरे
क्योंकि अपराधी नहीं होती

यह अलग बात है कि हथकड़ी और सजा
इन दोनों में से
आम आदमी के लिए सरकार क्या होती है?

उन्होंने भी उसे हथकड़ी पहना दी
और आम आदमी में तब्दील कर दिया

वह अपने ही गाल पर चांटे मार रहा है
उसके पास न कोई सहमति है और न कोई इंकार
धरती को पीटते हुए
वह अपने ही पैर तोड़ रहा है
he's punching himself in the face
there's no consoling him now
kicking the ground
he's hurting only his own feet

now on his crazy head
his hair
has grown a half inch
his long nails are growing black from the world
he is still as strong
as a person is
but he doesn't know who his enemy is
and his bullets have missed their real targets

now he's locked in a room
outside a guard
junior officer #42
paces from one pole to another
that his boots shine more than his eyes do
shows his eagerness for duty
from head to toe
his body is the epitome of discipline

on his chest
is a bullet-proof vest
he's wearing a hat and carrying a rifle
but how is he different from the first guard?
फिर भी उसके पागल सिर पर
बाल
आधा इंच बड़े हो गये हैं
उसके लंबे नाखून संसार की धूल से
गंदे हो रहे हैं
उसके हाथों में अब भी एक आदमी की ताकत
मौजूद है
लेकिन उसे अपने दुश्मन की सही पहचान नहीं है
और उसने गोलियाँ झपझपी जगह नहीं दागी हैं
अब वह एक कोठरी में बंद है
और उससे ब्यालिस नम्बर जूनियर
बाहर एक संतरी है
एक खम्भे से दूसरे खम्भे तक टहलता हुआ
चेहरे से ज्यादा जिसके बुक में चमक है
अपनी मुस्तैदी में
जिसका समूचा शरीर
अनुशासन की रग है
उसकी छाती पर भी
गोलियों का एक पट्टा है
सिर पर टोपी है और जाथ में बंदूक है
मगर यह पहलेवाले सिपाही से कहाँ पर अलग है?

यह भी अपने देश को
न कहाँ पर पाता है
न कहाँ पर खोता है
उससे कहा गया है कि हरेक पर शक करो
about his country
he too doesn't know anything
he was told to doubt everyone
to trust only his commanding officer
and his superiors
(but never to trust himself)
now we will have to wait and see
when he will go crazy too!

a good, hard-working man
went crazy
in the politics of 1974
there's no word for this
but you can trust me
there are no crazy people
in Baldev Khatik's family

everyone look out for yourselves
look after your kids
it's not just a rumor
(it's a new condition of living)
that in this country some people
are going crazy from hunger

but when they will shoot
it's already arranged that
this time crows won't die.
विश्वास केवल दीवान का करो--दरोगा का करो  
(उसका निजी कोई विश्वास नहीं)
अब देखना यह है कि  
ये कब पागल होता है !

एक अच्छा खासा  
काम करता हुआ आदमी  
पागल हो जाये  
1974 की राजनीति में  
इसके लिए कोई शब्द नहीं  
मेैं आपको यकीन दिलाता हूँ  
बलदेव खटिक के खानदान मेें  
कोई पागल नहीं था  

आप लोग अपनी परवाह करें  
अपने बच्चों की जाँच करवाएं  
यह केवल अफवाह नहीं  
(बलिक जिन्दा होने की नयी शर्त है)  
कि देश में कुछ लोग  
पेट से ही पागल होकर आ रहे हैं  

लेकिन वे जब फायर करेंगे  
तो यह तय है कि  
इस बार कोई नहीं मरेंगे।
don't put anything in this letter
not your thoughts
not your memories
don't put anything in this letter

nothing about your friends
no sadness
no complaints
no promise to get together
no news of illnesses
no family gossip
not your signature
or else this letter can be seized
don't put anything in this letter
अंत दें शी य

इस पत्र के भीतर कुछ न रखिए
न अपने विचार
न अपनी यादें
इस पत्र के भीतर कुछ न रखिए

न अपने संबंधों की छाप
न दुःख, न शिकायतें
न अगली मुलाकात का वादा
न संक्रामक बीमारियां
न अपने हस्तक्षेप
वरना ये पत्र पकड़ा जा सकता है
इस पत्र के भीतर कुछ न रखिए
because the homeless
draw the most suspicion
outside there has to be
the recipient’s name and address
in one spot
and the sender’s in another spot

news wants to be safe too
so don’t put any in this letter

the sender knows
what wasn’t written
why it wasn’t written
the reader knows

a blank page
will be scoured as well
so not even a single syllable
that the pen never filled out
don’t put anything in this letter

no incendiary word
no news of a child’s birth
no accidental death
no bomb
no reasonable logic
no wishes for the new year
no plans for divorce
क्योंकि जिनका ‘ठिकाना’ नहीं वे असहाय
सबसे ज्यादा संदिग्ध हैं
बाहर एक ओर किसी पानेवाले का नाम और पता
दूसरी ओर किसी भेजनेवाले का जरूर है

समाचार खुद हिफाज़त चाहते हैं
इस पत्र के भीतर कुछ न रखिए

भेजनेवाला जानता है
क्या नहीं लिखा गया
क्यों नहीं लिखा गया
पढ़नेवाला जानता है

कोरा
वह भी बांच लेगा
एक भी आखर
जिसके हिस्से नहीं आया
इस पत्र के भीतर कुछ न रखिए

न कोई विस्फोटक शब्द
न बच्चा पैदा होने की खबर
न कोई आक्रामक मृत्यु
न बम
न कोई वाजिब तर्क न
न नये साल की बधाई
don't put anything in this letter

the entire meaning
the entire letter
is the mailman's face
that during the day
grows more and more pale
and by nightfall
is a bloodless mask.
न तलाक का इशादा
इस पत्र के भीतर कुछ न रखिए

सारा मुद्रा
सारा पत्र
पोस्टमैन का रक्तहीन चेहरा है
जो रोज़ गांजा जा रहा है
और जिसे
शाम को वह जमा भी नहीं कर सकता।
Translator’s Note: In his 2015 national television interview on the TV talk show Āj Savere, or “Today, this morning,” the host Jasleen Vohra remarked to the Hindi poet Leeladhar Jagoori (b. 1940) that his biography is unusual for a successful Hindi poet. Jagoori’s mother died of smallpox when he was five. While his family were landowners, they didn’t have the resources to farm it profitably. At eleven, he ran away from home. At seventeen, he enlisted in the Indian Army, then absconded five years later at the outset of the Sino-Indian War of 1962. In the interview, he tells the story of avoiding court-martial when he wrote to Minister of Defense V. K. Krishna Menon, proposing that he could perform better “service” (sevā) to the country by writing poetry. (Menon agreed.) Later, he enrolled in Banaras Hindi University to earn an MA, and his first poetry collection was published in 1964.

Jagoori acknowledges the difficulties of his early life, but he states that he knew “hundreds” if not “thousands” of people like himself—ordinary Indians who overcame early struggles. Nevertheless, it’s likely that Jagoori’s sense of social and political engagement developed from his youth’s trying circumstances. His political consciousness was shaped by the 1960s, and, in retrospect, he writes about that era:

It’s clear that the new generation that came into consciousness in the days after Independence had suffered experiences that pushed many to the brink of suicide. They were overwhelmed with the meaninglessness of their lives. Backlit by Independence, they saw history, tradition, and the world around them as nothing more than another age of misery. (“The Lives of Old Desires” (“Purāne prasaṅg ke...
The youth rebelled. To oppose the current order, they took up arms. Strikes and arson were common. They turned against art. They lost faith in religion because they saw religion mixed up in politics. The youth favored opposition political parties, but that did not last because the opposition became corrupt once they came to power.

In the 1960s, the widespread issues of indigence and hunger were pushed aside by power-hungry politicians, and, Jagoori writes, “[it] was increasingly difficult for a ‘normal’ person to see a role [in society] for himself. Women were no better off: their lives were defined by sadness, uncertainty, and physical want” (14). Instead of feeding the hungry, the political class turned inward, obsessed with elections, power, and self-interests, and “[the] ordinary person was pushed offstage, and the ‘leaders’ were the stars of the show” (14). Ordinary people were negatively affected, and “[the] resentment and anger of the masses turned in nefarious directions. People started to think that ‘business’ meant extorting customers. The questioning of virtue and the welcoming of graft and deceit made every interaction dubious and people distrustful” (14). The political class grew in number to such an absurd point that Jagoori mocks, “One poet, two poets, maybe you can find three poets—/ But in this country every child is a ‘political leader’” (14).

Published in 2015, Jagoori’s essay “Between Doubt and Certainty” (“Sandeh aur nissandeh ke bīc”) revisits the same era. The irony is biting. Looking back on the volume It Is Still Night [Rāt ab bhi maujūd hai] (1976), he recalls his hope that its socially committed poems would quickly become nothing more than
a faint reminder of a bleak era of Indian history. But the longed-for change never happened. While his generation had expected for development to spur "an egalitarian society to emerge" (73), this never came about. Even with the first sour disappointment, however, he "didn't learn his lesson" because each decade brought new hope that had to be foresworn at its end. Then, when change did take place, it was "not the sort hoped for by the Communist Left" (73). Instead, it was change ushered in by the Far Right—Hindu nationalists and their retrenched "caste and community politics" (73). In this climate, the word "politician" (netā) became "an insult" (73).

The 1970s poetry of Jagoori shows the backstory of contemporary India's tumultuous socio-political history. The two poems published here are from his fifth volume What of the Earth was Saved [Bacī huī prīthvī] (1977), published at the end of the Emergency—the twenty-one–month period of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s unapologetically authoritarian rule. During the Emergency, the state used its enforcement mechanisms in repressive ways. The media was censored, the political opposition was jailed, a mass vasectomy campaign was led by Indira Gandhi’s son Sanjay Gandhi, and, in general, human rights abuses were rife and civil liberties were suspended.

In the span of thirty-six hours in 1975, Jagoori wrote three important poems, one of which is included here, "Inter-India Mail": a poem about the surveillance state under the Emergency. Another of those poems, "Secret" ("Bhed"), though not included here, is a thematic draft for “Baldev Khatik,” the first poem here: a long narrative poem about the eponymous tragic hero. Baldev Khatik, a low-ranking police officer in Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh, who comes from a mountain village. This poem's themes are those of poverty, hunger, lack of access to
medical care, the corruption of the police (their heavy-handedness and indifference), and the complicated social politics of North India. The poem starts with a focus on Rangtu, a poor villager from the mountains who is incarcerated for "stealing rations" to feed his family. The poem evokes the mountains and social realities of the region and its distinct ethos. Jagoori compares his poem to another more famous poem written at about the same time, Raghuvir Sahay’s “Rāmdās,” a poem that speaks in universalist generalities about the same themes. Jagoori laments that critics, coming from the urban elites, never understand the immanent regional, socio-cultural politics of “Baldev Khatik.” Hindi criticism, he writes, with exaggerated contempt, "has never found such creative ways to fail at getting into the history that a poet lays out in a poem" (75).

Reading “Baldev Khatik” does require a sensitivity to the importance of place as a means of defining the social setting, its politics, and ethos. The poem also asks a question that people across the globe are increasingly asking about the role of the police. The character of Rangtu is a symbol of the oppressed, and the police are directly responsible for his oppression: He, as a poor person, had to steal to feed his family, and, for this, he is incarcerated. The second half of the poem focuses on Baldev Khatik. His portrait is also one of the oppressed; as a “sentry,” or guard, he is on the lowest rung of the police force. The poem shows how the lack of basic humanity afforded him drives him mad. The suggestion is that as a person from Uttarakhand (and so from the mountains), he faces social stigmas and biases in Bijnor, in the Uttar Pradesh plains. In other work, Jagoori is perhaps even clearer in how he sees the police force as being as corrupt as the political class. Dhaniram Heer, an Indian scholar of Jagoori’s poetry, sum-
marizes Jagoori’s anti-police poem “Murder” [“Hatyā”]:

The job of the police is to rid society of oppression, corruption, bribe giving, and theft, and providing protection to the vulnerable is its main task. But in the contemporary world, the police don’t protect the masses but feast on them. Drunk on power, they are even more cruel and barbarous than corrupt politicians and the exploiter-class.

(86)

These words resonate in these poems.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**Matt Reeck** is a Guggenheim Fellow in Translation. His translation *What of the Earth was Saved* from the Hindi of Leeladhar Jagoori is forthcoming from World Poetry Books.