

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

BALDEV KHATIK

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

ब ल दे व ख ि ट क

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 रौशनी 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 उठें

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 भड़भड़ाकर उतरे  
 और रंगतू के घर की ओर दौड़े  
 उनकी दुरुस्त और निर्विघ्न दौड़ बताती थी  
 कि हमारे गांव की चल खराब हो गयी है  
 उनकी पोशाक

हमारे गांव के कुत्तों तक के लिए  
 अपरिचित थी

जिसके चिथड़े 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  
 उन्हें बैल के चमड़े की गंध नहीं आ रही थी  
 उनके पुलिसपैर  
 एक लाइन में  
 जैसे जलओद उछल रहे थे

क्योंकि ऐसे मौके पर  
 जो जिसके पास है  
 उसका उपयोग जरूरी हो जाता है  
 इसलिए कुत्ते भाँक रहे थे

जो रंगतू  
 कल राशन लूटने में शरीक था  
 उनके पास उसके नाम का वारण्ट  
 उसके परिवार ने रा 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 मुट्टी खोलकर  
 इस समय तक वे सोये हुए हैं

अपनी लात में ताकत पैदा करके  
 उन्होंने उसे बूट से उठाया  
 और तुरंत उसके हाथ बांध दिये  
 (वे हाथ जो बड़ी-बड़ी इमारतों पर  
 पलस्तर की तरह चिपके हुए हैं)  
 फिर थोड़ा बचे हुए अनाज के साथ  
 उसे शहर ले गये  
 जहाँ आदमी के लिए  
 जेल और पोस्टमार्टम की पूरी व्यवस्था है

पुलिसवालों पर आदमियों की आँखें थीं  
 इसलिए रंगतू की नंगी औरत  
 बाहर नहीं आ सकी  
 लेकिन भीतर  
 बच्चे उसके शरीर से पहनावे की तरह चिपके हुए थे

यह सुबह थी  
 गाड़ी के इंजन पर थरथराती हुई  
 अँधेरे के भीतर दुबके हुए अँधेरे में

was riding for “free” in a car for the first time

this was 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 हुग रंगतू  
पहली बार गाड़ी पर "फ्री" चढ़ रहा था

यह एक ऐसा वक्त था  
जब वनस्पति  
केवल घी 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 तरफ़दारी कर सकें

पुलिस की गाड़ी में उसकी शब्दहीन आत्मा  
एक नंगे पेड़ की तरह है  
जिस पर थाने पहुंचने से पहले  
कई हज़ार घमौरियां फूट पड़ेंगी  
कई हज़ार लाल घमौरियों में बंद पत्ते  
निशान की तरह बाहर उभर आएंगे  
भाषा अचानक सारे शरीर में फल पड़ेंगी  
और कई हज़ार 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 मिट्टी में उतरा हुआ रंगतू  
 न पेड़ है। न पत्ता है। न हवा है  
 अँधेरे के भीतर दुबका हुआ अँधेरे का कीड़ा भी नहीं  
 शब्द भी नहीं

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

थाने पहुँचते ही  
 गाड़ी से उतरते हुए रंगतू ने  
 थोड़ा देर के लिए खुद को बड़ा आदमी महसूस किया  
 झाँझवर 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 आडर" बनवाने तक  
 वह रंगतू को, रस्सा पकड़े हुए  
 एक कमरे से दूसरे कमरे में ले जाता रहा  
 तीन गिलास 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 कम्बल, 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 पौधों के बीच जो खराब खड़ी थी  
धतूरा जिसके इंजन से बाद हो गया था

कई पुरानी लाशों को लाँघते 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 श्मशानघाट पर पहुंचकर मरो  
 मरना कहीं भी अपराध नहीं है

और फिर तुम्हारी माँ का  
 हमारे पास कोई वारण्ट नहीं जो हम गाड़ी भेज दें  
 आखिर मरनेवाले को कौन पकड़ 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 विरक्त होना चाहता था  
 लेकिन अपना भविष्य उसे  
 भीतर-ही-भीतर ठग रहा था  
 कर्मकाण्ड की साडी कमज़ोरी को ढकता हुआ  
 उसका उस्तराफिरा 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 अभिनेता पर आम आदमी को मेकप कर देते हैं

बात दूसरी ओर चली जायेगी  
क्योंकि इस बात को कान और जुबान की तलाश है  
इसलिए मैं आपको  
फिर से थाना बिजनौर ले चलता हूँ  
जहाँ अपना घुटा हुआ सिर लेकर  
वह सिपाही इस समय संतरी-ड्यूटी 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  
राजनामचे पर हाथ रखे हुए  
जैसे वह शहर की पीठ हो

एक मर खाया हुआ आदमी चिंचियाता है  
मेरा बटुआ 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 shaven 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 हैं  
 मेरा दर्द--दर्ज करो  
 इस मटीले कागज़ पर मेरा दर्द--दर्ज करो

अपने होंठों पर मुर्दा दिन को ज़िंदा करते हुए  
 दीवान कहता है  
 किस कलम से करूँ ?  
 चांदी की कलम से करूँ ? सोने की कलम से करूँ  
 कि 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  
 मगर अपना गबाह भी साथ लाना  
 और किसी डाक्टर से यह भी लिखवा लाना  
 कि तुमने मार खायी-ही-खायी है . . .

बहार संतरी-ड्यूटी 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 धड़ाधड़ फायर करता है  
बंदूक के बट को थाने की दीवार से मारकर  
तोड़ देता है  
और सीढ़ियां उतरकर  
सड़क पर मरे हुए कौवों को लांघकर  
फरार हो जाता है

(थाने की बगल में उस समय सिनेमाघर के भीतर  
पर्दे पर एक ऐक्टर 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 चिल्लाता हुआ  
सीधा हमारे गांव में घुस आया

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

बच्चों से कहता है लाओ मेरी लकड़ी का कलम  
मैं 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  
 किसी को कोई फैसला दिए बगैर  
 वह दौड़ता हुआ आया  
 और रंगतू की झोपड़ी में  
 बेहोश होकर गिर पड़ा  
 (झोंपड़ी का दरवाज़ा खुला हुआ था  
 रंगतू राशनवाले मामले में जेल चला गया था  
 और उसकी औरत भी बच्चों समेत  
 वहां नहीं थी  
 मगर किसी ने भी उन्हें कहीं जाते नहीं देखा था  
 भीतर से नींद में पूछ झुकाये हुए  
 एक कुत्ता 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  
 दरवाज़ों की संधों को थोड़ा और चौड़ा करती हुई  
 रात ब्यानेवाली है  
 चिड़ियों और कौवों और कुत्तों के सामूहिक शोर में  
 पत्तियां थरथरानेवाली हैं . . .

तभी हमारे गांव के आकाश में  
 अचानक लोगों ने एक दरार देखी  
 सदर से रौशनी 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 चहेरों पर  
घरेलु थपेड़ों की गहरी शिनाख्त है  
टट्टी फिरते हुए बच्चे हैं। फोड़े हैं  
चूल्हे पर चढ़ा हुआ खदबदाता पानी है  
भात के भपारे हैं

वे उतरे और रंगतू की झोंपड़ी 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 सही जगह नहीं दागी हैं

अब वह एक कोठरी में बंद है  
 और उससे बयालीस 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 हाथ में बंदूक है  
 मगर यह पहलेवाले सिपाही से कहाँ पर अलग है ?

यह भी अपने देश को  
 न कहीं पर पाता है  
 न कहीं 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  
१९७४ की राजनीति में  
इसके लिए कोई शब्द नहीं  
में आपको यकीन दिलाता हूँ  
बलदेव खटिक के खानदान में  
कोई पागल नहीं था

आप लोग अपनी परवाह करें  
अपने बच्चों की जाँच करवाएं  
यह केवल अफवाह नहीं  
(बल्कि 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 कौवे नहीं मरेंगे।

I N T E R - I N D I A M A I L

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

अं त दे 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 हस्ताक्षर  
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 ज़्यादा संदिग्ध हैं  
 बाहर एक ओर किसी पानेवाले का  
 नाम और पता  
 दूसरी ओर किसी भेजनेवाले का  
 ज़रूर हो

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 आकस्मिक मृत्यु  
 न बम  
 न कोई वाजिब तर्क  
 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 इरादा  
इस पत्र के भीतर कुछ न रखिए

सारा मुद्दा  
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 prasāṅg ke*

prāṇ], in *On This Journey* [*Is yātrā me*], 11)<sup>1</sup>

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 bic”] revisits the same era. The irony is biting. Looking back on the volume *It Is Still Night* [*Rāt ab bhī maujūd hai*] (1976), he recalls his hope that its socially committed poems would quickly become nothing more than

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<sup>1</sup>All translations in this essay are the translator’s own.

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 hui pṛithvī*] (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.

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.

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