



THREE
SCORE
ASSAMESE
POEMS

Compiled and Translated by
D N Bezboruah



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Three Score Assamese Poems

Compiled and translated by
D. N. BEZBORUAH

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
Navakanta Barua	
The Silt	1
Measurements	2
The Eternal Pulse	3
Judas	5
Bats	6
Self-invited	8
The lift	9
Ajit Barua	
A Jacaranda Tree	10
Some Bronze Ferns	11
A Pair of Copper Arghas	12
Mind-misting Time	12
Wearing a Silk Robe Again Today	13
Hiren Bhattacharyya	
These my Words (for the younger poet)	15
For Poetry, a Single Prayer	16
Four Poems	16
Partaking	17
Postscript	18
Sound of the Flute	18
Nilmoni Phukan	
Was it a Friday or a Sunday	19

She Pursued me Even in my Sleep	20
Only the Sound of Stillness	20
Suddenly Lost	21
Where have they Gone?	22
Two Poems	23
Nirmalprabha Bordoloi	
Dawning	27
Ashes	27
Poignant	28
Unvanquished	28
Existence	29
Songs of Darkness	29
Early Dawn Hours	30
The One Who is to Arrive	31
Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya	
A Palace in Bukhara	33
Samarkhand	33
Keshab Mahanta	
My Fate	34
Hem Barua	
A Discovery	35
Homen Borgohain	
Memory	37
Dilip Barua	
Procession of Death	39
Hari Barkakati	
After the Immersion of the Goddess	41
On the Death of a Confidante	42
On the Death of a Leader	43
Question	43
Hirendra Nath Dutta	
The Berlin Wall	45

Bhaben Barua	
Memory of a Shipwreck	47
Words	48
The Weight of Lead	49
Hands in the Darkness	49
Harekrishna Deka	
Winds	51
Posterity	52
Moonlight	53
The Soldier's Death	54
Bireswar Barua	
Lily's Afternoon	55
Diary	56
Tarun Barua	
A Stream of the Ganga Flowed	57
A Moment of Courage	58
Anis-uz-Zaman	
Limits	59
Time	60
Fragrance	60
Niren Barua	
My Existence	61
<i>Note on the poets</i>	63

She Pursued me Even in my Sleep	20
Only the Sound of Stillness	20
Suddenly Lost	21
Where have they Gone?	22
Two Poems	23
Nirmalprabha Bordoloi	
Dawning	27
Ashes	27
Poignant	28
Unvanquished	28
Existence	29
Songs of Darkness	29
Early Dawn Hours	30
The One Who is to Arrive	31
Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya	
A Palace in Bukhara	33
Samarkhand	33
Keshab Mahanta	
My Fate	34
Hem Barua	
A Discovery	35
Homen Borgohain	
Memory	37
Dilip Barua	
Procession of Death	39
Hari Barkakati	
After the Immersion of the Goddess	41
On the Death of a Confidante	42
On the Death of a Leader	43
Question	43
Hirendra Nath Dutta	
The Berlin Wall	45

Bhaben Barua	
Memory of a Shipwreck	47
Words	48
The Weight of Lead	49
Hands in the Darkness	49
Harekrishna Deka	
Winds	51
Posterity	52
Moonlight	53
The Soldier's Death	54
Bireswar Barua	
Lily's Afternoon	55
Diary	56
Tarun Barua	
A Stream of the Ganga Flowed	57
A Moment of Courage	58
Anis-uz-Zaman	
Limits	59
Time	60
Fragrance	60
Niren Barua	
My Existence	61
<i>Note on the poets</i>	63

Preface

This is a slim anthology of my English translations of Assamese poetry written in the second half of the twentieth century. I do not presume to make any claims that the anthology is a representative collection of Assamese poetry written in those fifty years. In fact, considering the size of the anthology, it is inevitable that some poets have got left out. It is a collection of Assamese poetry that I liked and poetry that could be translated without very much being lost in the process of translation. I have also attempted to make it an anthology of what I regard as good Assamese poetry of the period. The focus is thus more on poetry than on the poets.

The anthology begins with poems of Navakanta Barua because he gave his contemporaries as well as younger poets a new language and a new idiom. He has thus left us a great legacy of not only an enriched Assamese language but also of many excellent poets.

I have dispensed with a long preface because I feel that readers should be left alone to read and enjoy poetry on their own instead of being told in advance about trends, influences and so on that may have worked on the poets. I have translated all the poems except one ("The Silt" by Navakanta Barua). As a translator, my major concern has been whether I have succeeded in rendering all these beautiful poems competently enough in another language and with total fidelity to the original poems.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the National Book Trust, India, for having agreed to publish this small anthology of translated Assamese poetry in an age when readers of poetry have dwindled in number and publishers of poetry have become even more scarce. I am also indebted to Shri Pradip Acharya and Shri Pankaj Thakur for a lot of help.

D. N. BEZBORUAH

Navakanta Barua

(1926-2002)

The Silt

The *palaash* fires have now burnt out.
The recent invasion of the *saal* and *sotiyen* woods
By the April storms is past.
Who keeps count of the dreams shed?
The banks of the Kalang, Kopili and Dijoo
Are strewn with ancestral bones!
The wild lily grows through
Where lay silent my grandmother's heart.

What did the cloud say? – Give, O Give,
Till thou art empty.
Plant some roadside trees;
Why, start a high school.
Heave a sigh or two – the beloved traveller
Is ever on the way.

Let sweeping waters wash away the shells of dead spiders.

Let our silts make fertile the two banks of Kalang.

In the furrows of our grandchild's fresh farm

We shall awake. In our fossils will they find
The amazing tale of one who remembers
The transmigrating past.
In the gutters that wash the dream-blind lane
We live in,
Is their future.

(Translated by the poet himself.)



Measurements

It is evening now.

Let's go to the tailor's to get measured.
Measurement of neck chest hands and arms
Measurement of the thumb.
We shall give measurement of the palm and the heart.
The entrails, the spleen and the liver,
Give count of hormones and love.
Let us give measurements of life
Of this and that and various things.
Only give the measurements.
We shall think of the stitching later on.
For the time being let's just give measurements.
We can only give measurements;
We can only take reckonings.
We shall record that suicides have
Swelled considerably.
We shall give count of the letters in a speech
Give count of the Christians in Arabia.
Just give measurements.

We shall think of the stitching later on.
Only think.
Someone after us will measure anew
Saying that our measurements were all wrong.
Fresh measurements they will take.
When will someone stitch the garment to fit Man?



The Eternal Pulse

How old is the night, Alakananda,
How old is the night?
Pale gas lamps give no hint,
The hands of the clock
Are still.

How late is it?
Could it be midnight?
Are you asleep, Alakananda,
Nestled in the crook of your arm?
The fragrance of darkness
Soars like incense
And is stilled
In the curves of your flesh.

The night wind is mute,
The bare sky clothed in dreams,
Darkness shines with the stars
On Maniktala's ditch.

Alakananda, song of my evening,
You are perhaps asleep.
The countless glittering petals
Of the flower that is the sky
Remind me of the Upanishads...
The moon-kissed breeze,
The waves, the stars and dreams sing
A lullaby for death.

The dew of sleep quivers
On your eyelids.
Night shines replete
With dreams
On Maniktala's ditch.

What dreams are yours
Alakananda?
Their fitful cadences
Spiral in the town's wakeful moonlight.
It's awake, yes,
The night is awake and so am I.
The sky and the moon
Keep watch,
Restless as Kunti's despair.
The fated house of wax...
Is it already in flames?

The sleepless candle
Pulses with life.
Eleven more pages of *Das Kapital*
And I am done.
Alakananda, are you still asleep?

The night shimmers
And the heart quivers
On Maniktala's ditch.



Judas

Murder my death with the weapon of your kisses.
Why do this to life
That has its frontiers on the present?
What is the earthly use, I ask you,
Of stretching and abridging
A few animate moments called life,
With the elasticity of bread and love-making,
Wine and fame?

In your kisses I have not felt a dearth of love;
What inexorable orbiting
Draws in your love into you
Enfolding all planets, stars?
What concentrated emptiness
Where the whirlpool ends!

What's the harm if the flames quivering around you
Be of hell?
Beyond the bounds of space and time
All flames are multidirectional.

Even last night I doled out the bread my body.
Even last night I poured out the wine my blood.
With the weapon of your kisses let my death be murdered;
On the farmyard of blood let there grow as sacred crops
Thirty pieces of silver.



Bats

The inert bats were suspended
Behind the string of grocery shops,
Innocuously blending
With the flaming abundance of yellow cassia —
A multitude of embryonic infants
In the cavernous innards of the sky.

They saw:
The earth strung above the sky,
And the trees that rest on the firmament
Thrusting their roots
Into the hoary darkness of the earth.
Women, their mats pulled over their resilient forms,
Chasing the weary hours of nocturnal ennui,
With a brief midday siesta.
And they saw us boys
Hanging upside down from our kite-strings
Like dubious notes of interrogation....

Then evening,
With the bats' hesitant flight
The perverse trees stand again
On the earth as is their wont;
Women lean on crimsoned portals
Longing anew for the drowsy hour.
And we boys
Inch back our fragile kites
With our reels timidly turning.
Consternation, like a winged missile
Hits them between the eyes:
The sky?
Whence did it rise above our heads?
They kept singing,
Hang on! Cling on!
Hold fast with both feet
To the liquid death that speeds
Through tense electric wires.

And then?
Then the sky will again lie
Recumbent.
The hills will pin it down
Astride in an inverted coital variant;
And under the monstrous breasts
Of an insatiable witch,
Love will die a shattering death.



Self-invited

Not *perhaps* my friend, I *know* there really is
A small islet of peace - where awaits
Your beloved saving up spring in her being,
To give you a taste of that nectar
Which our breath has not poisoned.

I know there is, my friend,
In the river that mind and brain have muddied,
In some part of it, yes,
Is the islet of your love's soul,
Where your sweetheart's calves
Mingle with mustard blossoms and
The warmth of the tepid sun.
Where tears with the faint smell of burning
Show the way to the frustrated clowns
In the circus of civilization.

If you can stand it,
I could take a day's leave
From my hell
To be your guest for a while -
At least an afternoon -
An April afternoon that the dove has stilled.
I shall weep if I can,
And on returning... on returning...

Alas, that I shall return!



The lift

One stolid jolt of inertia.

In this way
In this way we descend.
Above us the veranda of an ailing heaven,
Below, the pavement of a tattered livelihood;
In between, the dread of uncertainty;
A formless if:
What if we get stuck?

In this way
In this way we descend.
In this way we descend
From weariness to exhaustion
From wakefulness to insomnia
From forgetting to loss of memory.

Just in this way
Through the hissing of a mechanical serpent
We descend.
A descent where there is no movement
And where motion begins in the stopping.
In this way, in this way.

Above us the veranda of an ailing heaven,
Below, the crumbling pavement of a livelihood;
In between, a huge formless if.
In this way
In this way we descend.



Ajit Barua

(b. 1928)

A Jacaranda Tree

In the darkness of the small hours
I lost my way
And sat down.
Above me was
A dark tree, a black tree
A silken umbrella-like tree.
When the day broke, I saw
A jacaranda tree
Like a veil
Swaying in the wind.

A horse —
A decked horse with lowered head —
White like cotton wool, like foam, like wood
Goes round treading the pupil of my eye
And circling, circling,
The motionless gallop graven on the eye,
Circling, circling about and circling.

I kept holding my gouged eye far far away
Where I saw a decked horse circling.

Beat the drum, the drum of my heart
Nothing avails even when you conquer Lanka*
Beat the drum, beat the drum,
Yes, beat the drum.



Some Bronze Ferns

Amid thick ferns high as bamboo tops
And the darkness, is our home. There
The lantern lights her face
Like ember.

After forty years, darkness has lightened
The bronze ferns... Where are they?
The wax dolls shed quicksilver tears.

O gentle reader
What have I written?

What I used to see
You cannot perceive;
What I see today
I cannot show you.
Come, let us once again
Make our mistakes with skill.



Sri Lanka. *Lanka* rhymes with *danka*, an Assamese word for a large drum.

A Pair of Copper Arghas

Whenever I wake with the dawn,
Something scrapes my mind
Very gently, lest it hurt —
What if today the impossible happened?
What if today I were to see again
The first-love of my previous birth
Suddenly taking off her glasses,
Sparkling eyes suddenly lifeless,
Eyes the colour of a brown bird's wing?
(Do not fear, she cannot weep)

But these days,
Now and again I suspect
That she was capable of tears,
And on that day
Was only defiant
In restraint - like diamond.



Mind-misting Time

A smoky October morning,
The molten mist floats
As though this morning
I had lived some past life
(Just a one-year-old)
All over again. Because...

Last year on such a morning
I had wakened - wakened with fresh yawns,
On a moment's hazy bridge
Where time comes to a halt?

One day a mangy dog, meat in its mouth,
Held me clutched by my chest
Like the dread of going to school
Without that map of Kamrup.
And, to put it briefly,
That silent evening
Standing alone in the middle of the field
With fields, fields all around
And the clutch at my heart,
While from the distant village
The wafting smoke hummed.

(Four poems translated by D. N. Bezboruah and the poet)



Wearing a Silk Robe Again Today

Wearing a silk robe again today
I bask in the sun
The ceremonial turban on my head
(To hide the streaks of grey).
The best is what I didn't get?

Waking before dawn I smelt blossoms,
Jasmine oil, nose rings and sweat
In the cook shed of the spring festival.

Long, long paths over sun-baked sods,
Paths that perplex amid endless fields;
Long paths, paved roads, meandering tracks —

The path I didn't take must be the best.



Hiren Bhattacharyya

(b. 1932)

These my Words (for the younger poet)

In these, the words that have caressed
The orchards of my dreams,
Is the grace of a life-style,
The intimate warmth of time.

I have no inventions of my own.
Like a farmer,
I roll words on my tongue
To see how each one tastes.
I hold them in my palm
To see how warm they are.

I know words are the lusty offspring
Of man's noble creation;
But I am a mere poet
And in these words that I have relayed
From other shoulders,
Is man's cruel experience
And the mauling of history.



For Poetry: a Single Prayer

The poet's voice rebounds against mercilessness —
An uncontested echo.
At the tip of his pen quiver
The promised poems, his entity.

Threatened by a tenseness of nerves,
In the famished poet's feeble voice
Is the hymn of grief, the freedom of art...
Let me finish this poem like me;
The message of blood dies struggling
In the squalor of its denuded body,
Holding a quaint banner of the future.
Protect my right to hammer to fragments
The aloofness of familiar words
Or the stamina of the unvanquished sword
That slaughters a futile reality
About to die of anaemia.



Four Poems

1
With my hand on neck-high sunshine
Of the pregnant earth,
I took stock where the water was
And where the smell of crops —
The unvoiced prophesy of unborn days.

2

Between my wishes and my waiting,
A breezy winter.

3

After all, death is also a crafting;
An unappetizing sculpture chiselled out of life's granite.

4

I broke the earthen flower vase
Knowing that flowers blossom
In the complacency of my wayward mind.



Partaking

You know very well
This poet has nothing else -
Just a lone shirt
And that too parting at the seams.

Love must be just like this:
Baring covers to soothe the heart.



Postscript

Every day is a death for me;
Longevity is only in the line of my palm.
This is how I get on.
When I hear the footsteps
Of the dream fairy, I reflect:
Life is more beautiful
Than it can be.



Sound of the Flute

As I trudged through the darkness,
I suddenly heard
The clarion call of light.

In my bones, preserved to make
A devastating weapon,
I sensed the sound of a flute.

Under my blood, within my bones
The flute had lain hidden all these years.
And there I had heaped
Some dried leaves of time.

Who could have cleared those leaves?
Whose were those soothing hands?



Nilmoni Phukan

(b. 1933)

Was it a Friday or a Sunday

Was it a Friday or a Sunday?
The gust of wind
Snatched the ripe orange
From my mouth.

In my bosom I felt
A river dashed against my heart
And stilled in redness.

At the tips of leaves quivered
The remorse of a burnt evening.

Was it a Friday or a Sunday?
On the mirrors floated
The cry of fallen stars.



She Pursued me Even in my Sleep

She pursued me even in my sleep.
Where could she be now?

Does her face still bear
That uprooted tree?

Do the two reddened rivers
Still bathe her lips?

Do her eyes still bear
Those two black steeds?

Even today every night
They pause treading my heart.



Only the Sound of Stillness

At last from a niche in the rock
A dry cough wafted in the wind
Over the earth

And dashing against the cold mountain
Splintered and dropped down
In the hairy darkness of a flock of grazing sheep.

The sheep scampered;
And with the burning of their hairy darkness
were scattered
Numberless bits of cough

And falling on the branches of a denuded tree
They remained sticking to the dry blades of grass
Until the sun broke out.

The sheep scampered
To another field
Beneath the dust they had scattered.

Some round words
Vaporized and flew away —
Words flitting to and fro across the telegraph wires.

Some round words
And the stillness of a chunk of wax
And the stillness of the skeleton
Of some nameless old woman
Over the longevity of time
Only the sound of stillness.



Suddenly Lost

Suddenly lost
In the drizzle of the fading day
You, my little bird.

With whom have you left to blossom
Some name for the nude girl's sleep?

The paddy didn't ripen even this year.
Only beneath your eyelids
Is a roaring fire like a red wind.

Only you would have known
What the season is now -
You, my little bird.



Where have they Gone?

Where have they gone?
Those who were standing
Below the trees of ripe jamuns
Each one a bright spear?

In the stables of the darkness
Their horses remained tethered.

Are they still bathing?
Reddening the waters of some river?
Where have they gone?

In the sleep-snatched small hours
Of youths and maidens,
They are songs of the battlefield.



Was that what you spoke of
On that midnight
As you shed silent tears?

Three

In all these days
I couldn't find a life
That I could call my own
Or a death that was all for myself.

Who is it that nibbles to shreds
My days and nights?
How do I tide over this gory time?

Four

Who is that having some celebration
So early in the evening?
And who among the dead
Will attend it?

How many times did
The calf skin moo?
And how many times did they return
Reddened with blood?

What did they see on their return
When they looked back?
And who did they see
On that lonely labyrinthine path?

Five

Like the wind
The horses are jumping about in the courtyard.
Just listen to their neighing.

Last night, a poet like you
With a low voice
Passed away -

One who had realized
That there was nothing in his poetry
Any more profound
Than the chirping of the cricket.

Six

Have you fallen asleep?
Are you all that sleepy?
Wake up.

What were we talking about
Just a moment ago
About water being cold, stone hard
And peacocks spreading their plume?



Poignant

saw him leaving
long the paddy fields
When the sun sloped down,
a wicker sunshade on his head,
On his shoulders
The steady creak
Of two groaning baskets.

Behind him departed
The golden autumn sun
The thatched hamlet
The unpaved road along the shrubs
And the singing birds.
He was leaving and departed.
Who knows if he will return
In this lifetime!



Unvanquished

I shall die tomorrow;
Let me remain alive today.
O, my swift-flowing sorrow,
Keep flowing
Through the narrow-crested forest.
I am not weary.



Existence

I put myself in a cage
And latch myself in
With bits of reasoning.

I put myself on scales
And try to weigh myself
With an assortment of values.

All reasoning is unavailing.
All values helpless.

My existence
Cackles in laughter.

I flow through
The orifices of all prohibitions
And keep changing forms.
Sometimes a flower
Sometimes a sword
And sometimes... sometimes....



Songs of Darkness

Ears cocked,
I have waited
A thousand years
Beside the staircase of darkness.

Everything seems so pointless:
The daily sight of the sun,
My body's nocturnal song,
The mutual exchange of greetings.

I wait with my ears cocked.
Darkness walks up and down
Through my eyes,
Through my heart
Waiting in darkness with my eyes,
Waiting in darkness with my heart,
In darkness,
Darkness.



Early Dawn Hours

I meet him ever so rarely.
Whenever I do,
I hold his hands in mine
And pour out my greetings.
With bowed head I wish him:
"Be triumphant, victorious!"

I meet him ever so rarely,
The breeze becomes green
Whenever he opens his eyes;
Parched rivers come back to life
And a waxing moon suffuses the skies.

Rarely do I get to meet him.
When like a pearl
Bursting forth from its shell
He sometimes stands facing me,
He dwarfs the huge person
Within me.



The One Who is to Arrive

News of his coming
In the razor sharpness of your gaze,
News of his coming
In your blood,
In the stretching and clenching
Of your withdrawn hands.

He wants to come
And yet turns back time and again.
With furrowed brow
And helpless mien.
He returns
With angry inarticulate curses.

He returns at the sight of
Heads hung down;
At the sight of
Dull colourless eyes
That are prisoners of transient infatuations;
At the sight of hands

That should be outstretched
Retracted and engaged in onanism.
He would have come long ago.



Keshab Mahanta

(1926-2005)

My Fate

In your hand is my brow;
And the sweat of my brow
On the earth beneath your feet.

On my brow was your hand

In some torrential flood of tears
The earth wore deep.
The earth beneath your feet
Crumbled in landslides.

The trident on my forehead
Gleamed blood-red.



Hem Barua

(1915-1977)

A Discovery

I

Smearing the hues of the rainbow
On curtains of sleep
A dream hummed in my ears;
The owl's hoot floating at midnight
From the fig tree
Provided the background music.
Like one facing death
And straggling to the gallows,
My soul is mute, benumbed.
Defying mountains of sleep and snow,
My terrified soul gallops,
And gallops on.
Where?
I do not know, nor does my
Equestrian soul.
Galloping on and on
I suddenly awoke.

This world is the journey of a rider —
A throb, some excitement
And a wee bit of honest sweat.

II

How profound is this mind of man?
How rapt is this soul of man?
...Does anyone really know?
Does my mind's needle
Embroider flowers of desire
On your eyes?
My mind, on a still, sleepless night,
Has the quiver of a funeral flame.
The moonlight scattered in bits
Hasn't wept monsoon rains
At the sight of me.
I, the dead soul, am breathless.

Why do I have to wake up?
"This world is the journey of a rider."
...Just for that?



Homen Borgohain

(b. 1931)

Memory

The familiar cry of the bird is suddenly stilled,
Ripe fruits fall so quietly
That the tree remains unaware;
Fields turn desolate in the dark bellies of snakes.

This silent game of death
Is nature's age-old custom;
I alone am its tough, arrogant anomaly.
When death's infallible hand touches me
An indignant protest breaks out of my heart,
I look back time and again;
Such a gory lament rends my throat
Encumbering with its burden
The icy winds of my eternity.
The echoes ring ceaselessly.

For, in my entity is a memory ever alight
Of a timeless past and a distant future unspent
On whose bosom the imprint of a beloved face
Is ever bright through the ache of perpetual separation.

Nature's listless blind heart is bereft of memory;
Hence my need to create nature's past symbols —
The bright lamp-flame of words
To rend the gloom of death —

So that despising nature my immortal grief
Gratifies the unclaimed rights of another world,
Where I am deathless — an immortal promise of creation.

Dilip Barua

(b. 1933)

Procession of Death

The smell of drugs in my nostrils
Desolate hearts in every courtyard
Ambulations of near-dead skeletons.

A blazing noon and searing agony;
In the innards of my heart
The gnawing of unknown microbes;
And in the veins of my blood
A craving for life.

In my breathing
The forlorn moments of the deathless;
Beside me, words of cheer from familiar faces —
Reiterations evoking pale memories
Of lost days.

My orbit is a captive
In the desolate pity of this courtyard;
Scentless season flowers edge the precincts;
How much animation
In a sight-stricken gaze?