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## *Words that swim between us*

**Mags Webster, with Sharmila Ray**

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Mags Webster, with Sharmila Ray

### Words that swim between us

#### Abstract:

Poet Paul Celan speaks of a poem as ‘a message in a bottle’ washing up on ‘heartland’ (2001: 396). This idea is indeed a poignant one for our times, and for the estrangement as well as strangeness being experienced (at the time of writing) as a result of ‘lockdown’, ‘self-isolation’, and ‘social distancing’. But how can it shape the development of poetics between India and Australia? Celan’s notion has a timelessness and universality, based as it is on an intensely dialogical poetics. As this paper attempts to show, the nuances of this poetics become increasingly pertinent to this exchange between Kolkata-based academic Sharmila Ray, and myself, Perth-based poet Mags Webster. It has been, for me, an exercise in seeking poetic and ontological common ground. I discuss how, prompted by Ray’s epistolary approach to her home city of Kolkata, I came to interrogate more deeply, in my responses and through my thinking, notions around not only the ‘to whom’ of the poem, but also, and perhaps more importantly for this particular project, the ‘about whom’.

#### Biographical notes:

Originally from England, Mags Webster has lived and worked in Hong Kong and in Western Australia, where she has just submitted her PhD at Murdoch University. Mags’s poetry, reviews, and essays have been published in anthologies and literary journals in Australia, Asia, and the United States.

Dr Sharmila Ray is a poet and non-fiction essayist, writing in English, and anthologised and featured in India and abroad. Her poems and non-fictional essays have appeared in various national and international magazines and journals. She is an Associate Professor of the Department of History at City College, Kolkata. She has authored nine books of poetry. She was on the English Board of Sahitya Akademi, conducted poetry workshops organised by the British Council, Poetry Society of India, and Sahitya Akademi. Her poems have been translated into Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Slovene, Hebrew, Spanish, and Uzbek. She has received awards for poetry from Green Tara Initiatives (2018), All India Qaumi Ekta Manch (2019) and *Ethos* Journal (2019).

#### Keywords:

Kolkata – Perth – London – Celan – epistolary poems

## Introduction

The Romanian-born poet Paul Celan (1920-1970) wrote:

A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the – not always greatly hopeful – belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense too are underway: they are making toward something ... perhaps toward an addressable Thou, toward an addressable reality. (2001: 396)

The idea of ‘a message in a bottle’ washing up on ‘heartland’ is indeed a poignant one for our times, affected as the world is (at the time of writing) by the spread of COVID-19, and for the estrangement as well as strangeness being experienced as a result of ‘lockdown’, ‘self-isolation’, and ‘social distancing’. But Celan’s notion of poems as messages in a bottle has a timelessness and universality, based as it is on an intensely dialogical poetics (Stamelman 1987; Wolosky 1986, 1995; Klink 2000; Davies 2002). The nuances of this poetics became increasingly pertinent to this exchange between Kolkata-based academic Sharmila Ray, and myself, Perth-based poet Mags Webster.

I say ‘exchange’, though strictly speaking this poetic undertaking ended up becoming more of a solo project. This paper presents new content (mine) written in Australia, which responds to source content (Ray’s) generated from and about a city in India. It does not present any new content generated in India in response to source material from Australia. Beyond some opening cordialities, Ray and I did not accomplish a level of contact and collaboration as per the original brief. I am deeply grateful however for the contact we did manage, and for the work Ray shared with me. And this project remains very much an exchange, in ways I wish to tease out in the following paper.

In a discussion on poetic inquiry, Helen Owton notes the power of sharing stories ‘in ways that paint pictures in the mind, allowing readers to walk inside the pictures and to step into someone else’s world’ (2017: xi). And indeed, with nothing but our poetic texts as mediation, Ray and I were inviting each other to step back and forth into each other’s worlds. For me, the project gave rise to a richly meditative experience on aspects of the ‘I and thou’, the individual’s relationships to other people, the world, and things as espoused by Martin Buber (1937). Prompted by Ray’s epistolary approach to her home city of Kolkata, I came to interrogate more deeply, in my responses and through my thinking, notions around not only the ‘to whom’ of the poem, but also, and perhaps more importantly for this particular project, the ‘about whom’. The original poems I present, alongside the poems by Ray that inspired them, are the result of this exploration.

This article contains four main sections, the first three of which present a poem by Ray immediately followed by a poem penned by myself in response, and then my brief reflections about the poem, response, and the implications of this exchange. A brief conclusion summarises the learning I drew from this enterprise, and indicates findings I hope to be of relevance to creative scholarship in India, Australia, and beyond.

‘Open Letter To My Dear City’ poem and responses

***‘Open Letter To My Dear City’ by Sharmila Ray***

My dear city,  
in which name shall I call you  
Kalikata, Calcutta or Kolkata?  
You must be laughing, because Kalikata was never a city  
and Kolkata a new name.  
What you are is what was Calcutta.  
History remembers you against wind and indifference.  
In the purple-pink of the evening you saw your cosmopolitanism  
going down earth-chutes and third rate settlements cropping  
on your foreskin jamming your pores with concrete all in the  
name of politics and vote bank.

But I love you  
I want to count the moles on your face and  
breathe deeply the honey-mint of your breath.

Should I invent a new language?  
Tracing a line from your forehead down to your lips  
and then to your heart which is now warm and cruel  
like the enigma of oxymoron, I want to nestle there –  
sweet poison, corked and carefully preserved.  
Can you see the dark and then sudden shafts of light?  
Can you live again those poems and metaphors  
that haunt the fold of our flesh?

There is no answer.  
Silence.  
My language turns to hieroglyphs.  
Time whitewashes coat after coat  
For me, dear Calcutta let you be a thin line  
between dreaming and waking.  
Yours...

***‘Open Letter To My Dear City: a response’ by Mags Webster***

Your letter makes me lonely, makes me want to be 'dear city'. To read my many names as archive of the lives you track from street to street, till you hold me like your body's laughter, closer than the crosshatch of my shadowed alleys. Limb on limb, a map to every longing. You will find me younger yet I'm just as scarred; sparer than the metaphors you're used to. Tell me to engulf you: make me open up my dead ends and my prisons and my temples. I'll draw you to the dark allotments, scrape lacquer from your lines. Offer words to our new language, sweetness mixed with poison. Everything your letter says you love.

***Reflection on 'Open Letter To My Dear City' and 'Open Letter To My Dear City: a response'***

*Mags Webster:*

Initially I struggled to grapple with 'Open Letter To My Dear City', firstly because I am not intimate with Kolkata, nor even that knowledgeable about my current home city Perth; and secondly I acknowledge contact between my co-poet and I during this project proved to be minimal.

My response to Ray's poem is thus an attempt to capture the experience of one who is distanced both by an unexpected and unintentional paucity of communication (between myself and Ray), and by my unfamiliarity with the speaker's experience in Ray's poem. A breakthrough came when I realised the body metaphors in Ray's work spoke directly to my own tendency, poetically, to correlate external materiality and personal experience with the corporeal and carnal. This connection in our poetics helped me towards the idea of an imagined correspondence between my speaker and Ray's, using the body/city/map tropes of Ray's poem.

Another trigger was Ray's use of apostrophe: 'poetic address, especially to unhearing entities ... or absent or dead people' (Greene et al 2012: 61). 'My dear city', her poem begins. The absence or silence of a correspondent has never been an obstacle for poetry; indeed, the epistolary poem has long been a staple form, beginning with Horace (20 BCE/1966) and Ovid (5 BCE-8 CE/2011). Hence the speaker in my response is addressing someone who is far away, absent: the speaker in Ray's poem. My poem is also addressing an 'about whom' (in this case Kolkata) of which neither I as poet, nor my poetic persona, have any knowledge. And on a non-poetic, meta-level, I am also addressing the nominal nature of the contact that characterised this collaboration.

In terms of form, my response evolved from a lineated to a prose poem. At the time of writing I did not question this transition: it is customary for me to experiment with a variety of formats at any stage in poem drafting. Upon reflection, however, I realised that settling on a prose poem rather than a lineated poem could have been an appropriate if unconscious choice for the following two reasons. First, a prose poem more closely mimics the conventional format of a letter. Second, a prose poem serves to intensify the contrast between my speaker's experience of containment and restraint in loneliness (and their frustrated

eagerness to break free) with the idea of a meandering map, and Ray's looser poem structure. The love letter Ray writes to Kolkata generates the wistful longing from my poem's speaker to the speaker in hers. Thus, at an oblique angle, the dialogue between poet and poet, city and city, absent and present is suggested and maintained.

### **'15.15 Tube from Park Street...' and 'London' poem and responses**

#### ***'15.15 Tube from Park Street...' by Sharmila Ray***

15.15 pm – Tube from Park Street  
stealthily moving among mute coldness and  
moist shadows.  
She was on that train.

16.15 pm – Among pillow and bathing darkness,  
hungry bodies spilling at the core and  
she the heart of the blessed bed.

It was nothing but a falling autumn leaf.  
It was nothing but a dent in the mattress.  
It was nothing really,  
maybe, gold and chalcedony  
or perhaps the unfurnished light  
of late September...

12 midnight – Yet it seems just now.

#### ***'London' by Mags Webster***

*Responding to '15.15 Tube from Park Street...'*

Sunrise furs you gold and ermine, tips the Bailey scales  
with gilt, fires your churches into angelus and matins,  
Ethelberga, Anne and Agnes, Botolph, Clement, Giles.

Morning quenches watchmen's lanterns, Lyme Street,  
Hoare's Yard, Mincing Lane. Smears its mist above  
the plague pits: Houndsditch, Pest Field, Aldgate East.

At this hour, you own the Thames, your ribcage  
Southwark, Blackfriars Bridge. Walbrook Wharf  
is your intestine; lungs Portsoken, Seething Lane.

Sleeping lion, you are this city, when you roar you wake  
the dead. Where you shit the markets ripen, where you rut,  
the clergy shake. Rich and poor feed from your kills, we're

tapeworm in your guts. Or we hitch our fortunes, flea-like,  
to the fibres of your hide. For you are golden fur this morning:  
Bank of England, debtors' prison, Bedlam, Bow, Cheapside.

***Reflection on '15.15 Tube from Park Street...' and 'London'***

*Mags Webster:*

Ray's poem plays with memory. It casts its speaker into a reverie where the reliability of recall is brought into question yet certain details, like the time of day and location, are precise. The poem reads like an elegy for a love affair; however, it was Ray's reference to the Park Street Tube that instigated my response.

I looked up all the locations Ray mentions in her poems about Kolkata. I viewed maps I had never seen before and yet that seemed strangely familiar in their depictions of parks adjacent to roads, to junctions and underground stations. Such is also the topography of London.

I lived in London during my twenties and thirties. For a few years, I worked in the financial district of the Square Mile of the City of London, the Neolithic cradle (Ackroyd 2001: 10) of today's modern city sprawl. In the City of London, one is perpetually reminded of the city's Roman and medieval antecedents. Construction projects regularly expose evidence of previous settlements, and the network of streets follows the higgledy-piggledy it has held for centuries.

The City of London in a summer heatwave is a singular experience. In the early mornings, the quality of the light (as I remember it) seems to render the buildings, bridges, and river as if coated by golden fur. This memory was the trigger for my poem 'London': in which it felt natural to play with temporality and turn back time, first to memories of my London experiences, and second, to a London several hundred years before the London I knew. An 'about whom' centred on a London I could only imagine, just as Ray's poem is set in a Kolkata I can only imagine.

The names (still current) of the Square Mile's ancient landmarks offer a rhythmic pulse and structure; names like Portsoken and Seething Lane (where Samuel Pepys lived) [1] are themselves full of poetry. The London of this poem is some years post Plague and The Great Fire of 1666, when the City is beginning to find its own rhythm again, it has rebuilt and its citizens are attempting once again to make their fortunes among the streets which, legend has it, are paved with gold. I envisaged the City as a lion, powerful yet quiescent, the sunrise burnishing its hide. The lion is symbol of England and, I discovered, also emblem of the Republic of India (Pal 2006).

Whether centuries ago or now, London retains that glittering allure for grafters, innocents, and fortune hunters. While ‘London’ does not explicitly state that, the lion/London as addressed by the speaker is mighty and magnificent yet, as the poem progresses, all is not as it seems. For this beast is invaded by parasites – a quite different version of Ray’s ‘hungry bodies spilling at the core’ (‘15.15 Tube from Park Street...’) – in a symbiotic yet if unchecked, self-defeating relationship with their host. Hence the Bank of England is cheek by jowl with debtors’ prison.

### **‘Kolkata’ and ‘Ghost nets’ poem and responses**

#### ***‘Kolkata’ by Sharmila Ray***

Kolkata are you listening  
 I am apprehensive about you  
 and your ghettos and new friends and sleaze.  
 The dark language that emanates from you have  
 hardened compassion. You don’t understand anymore  
 the December mist over Victoria nor the melancholic grayness  
 of a monsoon afternoon. You don’t care what happens to those glorious  
 buildings plastered with creepers and posters and babbling humanity on the side walks  
 intoxicated with opium and tar. What happened to that shy smile that speaks of a  
 happy heart or that prayer on your full bodied lips? Tell me, this morning when the  
 first light touched your forehead did you feel love, hope, joy or exhilarating madness  
 that comes from the salty smell  
 of blood and sweating hounds ready for the kill?  
 Kolkata are you listening  
 It’s time, here in this Nemean darkness let’s go together to gather light from the abyss  
 of bitterness to re-invent a new you.

#### ***‘Ghost nets’ by Mags Webster***

##### ***Responding to ‘Kolkata’***

World turns its wheel, first spring again: season of conception.  
 Magpies marble morning, javelin cyclists under trees. Osprey  
 mantles estuary, river’s shift is flecked with prey, Perth’s  
  
 asymmetric towers are cartoon stark against blunt blue. A Saturday  
 regatta on the Swan, a wedding shoot despite the wind, bride  
 and groom are ‘liked’ for smiles that will outlast their marriage.  
  
 Out on the edge of west I wait, the ocean pearling round my feet,  
 imagine you vibrating with the voices of that mighty fang of land  
 that inks this ocean’s name, your city’s colours, clamour, heat.



I would tell you of 'my' city, but its cadence isn't mine, comes from  
mineral and wetland, skirl of water serpent tail, from song and stamp  
of feet and greeting, blood of birth and battle, from a secret weeping.

I can only throw these lines to you, attached to deserts, to a million stories,  
coastline broken from Gondwana, ancientness you'll understand.  
When they reach your shores their syntax will be splintered, saline,

reading them will not unknot them, nor salvage what has slipped  
the mesh. Think of them as ghost nets trawling through the tide's  
acoustic rumour: briefly full of words and songs that echo indigo.

### ***Reflection on 'Kolkata' and 'Ghost nets'***

*Mags Webster:*

'Ghost nets' was the first poem I wrote for this project. I wrote it during *djilba*, or 'first spring' of the Noongar seasons, hence the references in the opening lines to conception, and nest-building, dive-bombing territorial magpies.

My poem is perhaps less of a direct response to Ray's 'Kolkata' than it is expressive of a movement between two positions. My initial perception was of a seemingly insurmountable distance and difference between our two locations. Then I realised we shared a crucial link, embodied by the Indian Ocean, which borders the coasts of India and Western Australia. For the ideas behind my poem, the symbolic linkage of these waters was rendered stronger by imagining the words that were notionally swimming between us as a consequence of this project. Thus the poem plays with the idea of ink and pigment merging with the Indian Ocean.

'Words that swim between us' was my original title for the poem: an enactment of Celan's 'message in a bottle' (Celan 2001: 396). Except that in my poem the bottle is transposed to a metaphor of more pressing relevance for the twenty-first century: ghost nets. To reach its destination, a message depends on staying corked in a bottle; but words can escape a net, and drift on as remnants. A global environmental problem, ghost nets are the abandoned detritus of broken and derelict fishing gear, tossed or torn from trawlers and fishing boats. Drifting currents and tides, snagging on reefs and wrecks, these abandoned meshes continue to fish indiscriminately as if cast by invisible hands (hence the term 'ghost'). [2] While the problem is more acute in the Cape York and island shores of north-eastern Australia, it is also a worrying phenomenon in the Indian Ocean.

Leaving aside the destructive aspects of ghost fishing, my poem uses the idea nets can continue to drift, and sift, and carry between continents. The poem's speaker admits to being unable to 'speak' for Perth, as it is not 'her' city. The lines she throws into the Indian Ocean are nevertheless strung with song and story, which while not belonging to her own culture, she

hopes will resonate with all she cannot say. This is implicit in the closing stanza where only the ocean itself can deliver these words and songs.

Ray's poem twice asks: 'Kolkata are you listening'. Perhaps, with its concluding allusions to sounds and deep ocean listening, 'Ghost nets' is asking this question a third time.

### Concluding thoughts

People's relationships with cities can be complex; as Ray's poems show, the love for a city may be fierce but is not blind. She calls out Kolkata's 'ghettos and new friends and sleaze' ('Kolkata') but signals that this is a city of constant change, and open to more: 'let's go together to gather light from the abyss / of bitterness to re-invent a new you' ('Kolkata').

Re-inventing a new you has been a key part of this project, which for me has been an exercise in seeking poetic and ontological common ground as the basis for my responses. It has also been a way of acknowledging a perceived difficulty, in the absence of contact, in finding that common ground. Yet paradoxically, this perceived difficulty has also enriched the experience, heightening my consciousness of the 'to whom' and 'about whom' of any poetic exchange, or indeed any poem.

Joanna Klink, writing about the dialogic nature of Celan's poetry, and its debt to Buber, observes that for Celan: 'The IYou relation is ... the condition of possibility of anything happening at all in the poem. Beyond the IYou relation, the world is in doubt' (Klink 2000: 9). At the time of writing, Klink's is an apt comment, for there is much uncertainty and doubt in the world.

As poets, I daresay we hope that our messages in bottles will indeed reach 'heartland'. But we also know we will never stop sending them, irrespective of a response. Yet by writing a poem have we not already made contact with another? The complexities of the I/You relation as I have experienced them – through the privilege of participating in this project – have prompted me to reassess somewhat the nature of what I do as a poet. For me it has been a re-affirmation that every work is a gesture in some way or another to another work. Celan was unequivocal about what he did: 'I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem' (1986: 26). A handshake cannot happen with fewer than two people. Perhaps Ray and I will have a chance to extend hands across the Indian Ocean once again.

### Notes

1. 'This morning we met at the office: I dined at my house in Seething Lane' (Pepys 2004: 230).
2. See Macfadyen et al (2009).

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