

# Madness

*an anthology of world poetry*



editor  
**Keshab Sigdel**

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Editor : Keshab Sigdel

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## Poetry and madness

Silence terrorizes.

I was on a Vipassana meditation retreat from 14 to 25 March 2020 on Shivapuri Hill located onto the north of Kathmandu. After the retreat, we were transported to our places in a jeep that plied between the patrolling police vans. I could see no trace of human presence except the security personnel who were mobilized in the streets. The regular crowd and noise had disappeared from the city. Stray dogs were loitering along the highway, and I could see a swarm of houseflies swirling around garbage at the street corners. As we reached the crossroads at Maharajgunj, we heard the sirens. Our vehicle slowed down to give way to a hearse guarded by soldiers, probably leading to the crematory at Pashupati. Silence ruled the city except for the sirens of the security vans and ambulances. For the first time, I was terrorized by silence.

The government had announced a nationwide lockdown on 24th March, a day before our meditation retreat ended, to combat the spread of Covid-19. The managers of the meditation center with considerable access to the people in the government somehow managed to transport us close to our homes with security escorts. As I reached Kirtipur, the area of my residence, I saw my neighbors had obstructed the alley that led to my house, and I could not go

home. I suddenly became 'homeless' and was disconnected from my family and was forced to be 'exiled' to a building abandoned for years which was then turned into a 'quarantine center.' I could not figure out whether the security was against the people or the virus! The everyday metaphors that I used to comprehend things and communicate with people failed to make any sense.

It was not only my story. The entire world struggled to make sense of things as the pandemic grew worse. The body was pathologized due to the infection of Coronavirus. And the mind was traumatized by the flood of dis/information. Groceries were closed. And people were worried about hoarding some foodstuff to ensure that they did not die of hunger. I even tried to explore my old acquaintances working in hospitals and drugstores to secure an oximeter and an oxygen cylinder. Survival was the only aim. For me, any sort of creative writing was almost unimaginable. The number of infected people, shortages of basic health facilities, the death tolls, and the people's apathy towards the Covid-19 victims were creating a maddening atmosphere. The pandemic was not only the reason for the growing madness— many sharp razors of political, social, economic, and environmental inequities had already deeply wounded society. And I was wondering what other creative people thought about these global crises. As a poet, I wanted to connect myself to a larger canvas of words to make sense of things. And hence I conceived the idea of an anthology of poetry on madness. I shared this idea with my friend Jeebesh Rayamajhi who instantaneously encouraged me to take this project forward. The poems included in this anthology are the submissions in response to the call for poetry on madness.

As I continued receiving submissions from poets around the world, I also engaged myself in reading academic discourses on madness, including Michael Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*. But it is no surprise that the poetic imagery in the poems that arrived in

my mailbox deciphered the meaning of madness more clearly than did the critical engagements on madness. The following line from Palestinian poet Paul Catafago's "The madness in exile" provides a subtle definition of what it means to be mad: "There is madness in choosing to/ go against the flow/ to refuse to forget." The poem then juxtaposes this madness with the idea of sanity. Sanity in contemporary times is to subscribe to the ways of the world that are largely shaped by capitalism. In order to preserve sanity, one needs to give up utopian thoughts and "... put my head down;/ and be a part/of the machine." But what would a poet do? Succumb to power? Be a cog in a machine? Or resist? Catafago readily answers: "But I resist this. /I will not lose hope." He instead chooses to live in exile with his poetry. He writes, "We found home/in/ poetry." This poem is a lucid example of the corollary between madness and poetry.

We all have our stories of agony and pain. We want to share them and get relieved. But when the possibility of dialogue is interrupted, the consequence is madness. In such a situation, recourse to poetry can be a healing experience. Iranian poet Mahnaz Badihian expresses her inability to communicate her anger to the world outside in her poem "I'll lend my hands." The humiliation that body brings to her is unbearable. So, she takes recourse to poetry to vent her anger to herself:

Sometimes the only ones  
I can talk to are my hands  
I speak to my silent skin,  
squeezing anger from my fingers

Italian poet Laura Garavaglia makes a subtle portrayal of dehumanization in her poem "Migrant," where she describes the global phenomena of transnational movements. The human migrants are equated to rats through the image of "hopeless people and rats" that "get through/the barbed wire." And Garavaglia shows



the indifference of fellow human beings toward those refugees on the move:

I run away (I don't know where) to  
show dignity.  
I have a canyon in my brain  
and craters in my lungs.  
I can make it.

In "Poem for a refugee," Croatian poet Lana Derkač uses natural metaphors to describe the wounds of the world. For her, the island becomes a scar on water, and stars, the open wounds in darkness. But her limitations do not allow her to intervene in the healing of the wound: "Every island is a scar on water. / Stars are open wounds in darkness. / The terrace I'm sitting on is too far/ to throw Tyrosur to any of them/ the powder against infections."

Puerto Rican poet Luz María López meditates on the crises of our times. She is scared that the vicious circle of poverty and inequity is engulfing humanity. In "Dawns," the poet warns us of the newer forms of suffering to come:

I look through the slits,  
where many fires  
are alive too.  
The battlefields.  
The dead bodies.  
I lower my eyes.  
Another pain  
is born.

The world is witnessing a growth of the refugee population due to economic, political, and other reasons. Unfortunately, the political and administrative realms are not humane to them. They are reluctant to recognize human beings but only the numbers of their passports. Due to new administrative schemas, the refugees fear that they will not be allowed to go back home. The sheer hopelessness is looming

large over humanity. Michael Dickel, an Israeli poet, presents this fear in his poem “Tuesday at the hospital”:

Afraid I would not be allowed to return home,  
I carefully sewed my passport into my pocket with silver thread.  
This young man I watched lost his passport  
in some similar land of simulacrum belief,  
religious rhetoric, and war  
this land lost in shadow  
suspended above the geology of this world  
a place I cannot travel to anymore  
In the mirror, I see nothing, fog, looming silhouettes.

What happens to people when they are filled in with agony and anger? What happens when they cannot express their anger publicly because they do not have citizenry status and are deprived of social and economic rights? What happens to people when they are dehumanized to the level of animals? What happens when they see there is no healing of their wounds? What happens to them when they find they are exiled and cannot return to their homes? The poets in this anthology have tried to respond to these questions through the metaphor of madness.

Nepali poet Shreedhar Lohani, in his poem “Madness,” invents a metaphor of “dead magic” to suggest that the promises of the world governments have failed and we are living in a situation of maddening disillusionment. He writes, “Magic is dead/ miracles happen no longer/irony’s the only survivor.” Traditional metaphors do not make sense anymore because you cannot explain the corrupted world in the purest form of language. The scene has become obscene. And you need irony and antimetaphorical language to talk about such obscenity.

Kosovan poet Xhemil Bytyçi paints a bleak picture of the ongoing struggle in the world in his poem “Burial in a glacier.” It describes how these struggling voices are suppressed: “People in

angst/ Powerless, voiceless, and soundless, / Awaited their turn/  
To be buried in the glacier.” But there is a note of hope. American  
poet Connie Carmichael in “I was only there because you called  
me,” indicates that there is increasing solidarity against inequity and  
injustice and predicts an upcoming apocalypse: “I gave you a spark,  
and you blew on the flame/ and the fire kept burning till nothing was  
the same.”

The poems in this anthology suggest a clear voice of resistance.  
In “Lady of the snakes,” Greek poet Konstantinos Bouras shows  
how women refuse to reproduce the shadow of social expectations:  
“The Woman who is wearing the Cyclamens/ Beyond her breast/  
is the snake which refuses/ To vomit my shadow.” In a similar vein,  
Moroccan poet Mohamed Abid, in his poem “Upheavals,” presents  
the idea of madness through the image of an intoxicated person  
whose only aim is to overthrow the world:

What if,  
we all got drunk  
in a public square  
And insobriety  
bestowed a single idea:  
Overthrowing the world

The poems in this anthology also portray the theme of hope.  
Greek poet Dinos Siotis in his poem “Madness,” asks us to “stay  
awake” and “keep our eyes open.” The hope comes when the poet  
introduces us “the Braille method/is touching the strings of our  
struggle to knock down injustice.” In the same vein, Spanish poet  
Soledad Benages Amorós in “Poetry, that gun” envisions life even  
“from the darkness of the roots.” Turkish poet Ataul Behramoglu  
in his poem “Besieged” shows how our visions are “under siege,”  
and how we are forced to take part in “decisions that will shape  
my doom.” But he also presents an apparent hope, a possibility  
to bloom:

Under siege, I am obliged to make  
Decisions that will shape my doom  
But nothing can dry up the love  
That green in arid soil, I make bloom

\*\*\*

Reading submissions of around four hundred poets from 105 countries was an enlightening experience for me (though all of them could not appear in this anthology). After contemplating the poems in this anthology, I now share Jean Khalifa's opinion that madness is a form of consciousness that is "no longer tragic but critical." The consciousness of madness begins with a poetic realization of "bearing witness" to the monologues of power through systematic apparatuses of inclusion and exclusions. The madness in its critical form manifests in the "act" of questioning the "monologues" in order to re-initiate the dialogue. The poems in this anthology are a testimony to the fact that contemporary world poetry does not merely bear witness to the dark side of affairs but speaks out against those darks in the form of rage and resistance. I believe this performativity of rage and resistance provides a more humane face to poetry.

**Keshab Sigdel**  
Editor



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