

# Jejuri Arun Kolatkar



JEJURI  
ARUN KOLATKAR

PRAS



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Jejuri  
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## THE BUS

The tarpaulin flaps are buttoned down  
on the windows of the state transport bus  
all the way up to Jejuri.

A cold wind keeps whipping  
and slapping a corner of the tarpaulin  
at your elbow.

You look down the roaring road.  
You search for signs of daybreak in  
what little light spills out of the bus.

Your own divided face in a pair of glasses  
on an old man's nose  
is all the countryside you get to see.

You seem to move continually forward  
towards a destination  
just beyond the caste mark between his eyebrows.

Outside, the sun has risen quietly.  
It aims through an eyelet in the tarpaulin  
and shoots at the old man's glasses.

A sawed off sunbeam comes to rest  
gently against the driver's right temple.  
The bus seems to change direction.

At the end of a bumpy ride  
with your own face on either side  
when you get off the bus

you don't step inside the old man's head.



## THE PRIEST

An offering of heel and haunch  
on the cold altar of the culvert wall  
the priest waits.

Is the bus a little late?  
The priest wonders.  
Will there be a puran poli in his plate?

With a quick intake of testicles  
at the touch of the rough cut, dew drenched stone  
he turns his head in the sun

to look at the long road winding out of sight  
with the evenlessness  
of the fortune line on a dead man's palm.

The sun takes up the priest's head  
and pats his cheek  
familiarily like the village barber.

The bit of betel nut  
turning over and over on his tongue  
is a mantra.

It works.

The bus is no more just a thought in his head.  
It's now a dot in the distance

and under his lazy lizard stare  
it begins to grow  
slowly like a wart upon his nose.

With a thud and a bump  
the bus takes a pothole as it rattles past the priest  
and paints his eyeballs blue.

The bus goes round in a circle.  
Stops inside the bus station and stands  
purring softly in front of the priest.

A catgrin on its face  
and a live, ready to eat pilgrim  
held between its teeth.

## HEART OF RUIN

The roof comes down on Maruti's head.  
Nobody seems to mind.

Least of all Maruti himself.  
May be he likes a temple better this way.

A mongrel bitch has found a place  
for herself and her puppies

in the heart of the ruin.  
May be she likes a temple better this way.

The bitch looks at you guardedly  
past a doorway cluttered with broken tiles.

The pariah puppies tumble over her.  
May be they like a temple better this way.

The black eared puppy has gone a little too far.  
A tile clicks under its foot.

It's enough to strike terror in the heart  
of a dung beetle

and send him running for cover  
to the safety of the broken collection box

that never did get a chance to get out  
from under the crushing weight of the roof beam.

No more a place of worship this place  
is nothing less than the house of god.

## THE DOORSTEP

That's no doorstep.  
It's a pillar on its side.

Yes.  
That's what it is.



## WATER SUPPLY

a conduit pipe  
runs with the plinth  
turns a corner of the house  
stops dead in its tracks  
shoots straight up  
keeps close to the wall  
doubles back  
twists around  
and comes to an abrupt halt  
a brass mouse with a broken neck

without ever learning,  
what chain of circumstances  
can bring an able bodied millstone  
to spend the rest of his life  
under a dry water tap

## THE DOOR

A prophet half brought down  
from the cross.  
A dangling martyr.

Since one hinge broke  
the heavy medieval door  
hangs on one hinge alone.

One corner drags in dust on the road.  
The other knocks  
against the high threshold.

Like a memory that gets only sharper  
with the passage of time,  
the grain stands out on the wood

as graphic in detail  
as a flayed man of muscles who can not find  
his way back to an anatomy book

and is leaning against  
any old doorway to sober up  
like the local drunk.

Hell with the hinge and damn the jamb.  
The door would have walked out  
long long ago

if it weren't for  
that pair of shorts  
left to dry upon its shoulders.



## CHAITANYA

come off it  
said chaitanya to a stone  
in stone language

wipe the red paint off your face  
i don't think the colour suits you  
i mean what's wrong  
with being just a plain stone  
i'll still bring you flowers  
you like the flowers of zendu  
don't you  
i like them too

## A LOW TEMPLE

A low temple keeps its gods in the dark.  
You lend a matchbox to the priest.  
One by one the gods come to light.  
Amused bronze. Smiling stone. Unsurprised.  
For a moment the length of a matchstick  
gesture after gesture revives and dies.  
Stance after lost stance is found  
and lost again.  
Who was that, you ask.  
The eight arm goddess, the priest replies.  
A sceptic match coughs.  
You can count.  
But she has eighteen, you protest.  
All the same she is still an eight arm goddess to the priest.  
You come out in the sun and light a charminar.  
Children play on the back of the twenty foot tortoise.

## THE PATTERN

a checkboard pattern  
some old men must have drawn  
yesterday

with a piece of chalk  
on the back of the twenty foot  
tortoise

smudges under the bare feet  
and gets fainter all the time as  
the children run

## THE HORSESHOE SHRINE

That nick in the rock  
is really a kick in the side of the hill.  
It's where a hoof  
struck

like thunderbolt  
when Khandoba  
with the bride sidesaddle behind him on the blue  
horse

jumped across the valley  
and the three  
went on from there like one  
spark

fleeing from flint.  
To a home that waited  
on the other side of the hill like a hay  
stack.



## MANOHAR

The door was open.  
Manohar thought  
it was one more temple.

He looked inside.  
Wondering  
which god he was going to find.

He quickly turned away  
when a wide eyed calf  
looked back at him.

It isn't another temple,  
he said,  
it's just a cowshed.

## AN OLD WOMAN

An old woman grabs  
hold of your sleeve  
and tags along.

She wants a fifty paise coin.  
She says she will take you  
to the horseshoe shrine.

You've seen it already.  
She hobbles along anyway  
and tightens her grip on your shirt.

She won't let you go.  
You know how old women are.  
They stick to you like a burr.

You turn around and face her  
with an air of finality.  
You want to end the farce.

When you hear her say,  
'What else can an old woman do  
on hills as wretched as these?'

You look right at the sky.  
Clear through the bullet holes  
she has for her eyes.

And as you look on  
the cracks that begin around her eyes  
spread beyond her skin.

And the hills crack.  
And the temples crack.  
And the sky falls

with a plateglass clatter  
around the shatter proof crone  
who stands alone.

And you are reduced  
to so much small change  
in her hand.

## CHAITANYA

sweet as grapes  
are the stone of jejuri  
said chaitanya

he popped a stone  
in his mouth  
and spat out gods



## HILLS

hills  
demons  
sand blasted shoulders  
bladed with shale

demons  
hills  
cactus thrust  
up through ribs of rock

hills  
demons  
kneequartz  
limestone loins

demons  
hills  
cactus fang  
in sky meat

hills  
demons  
vertebrated  
with rock cut steps

demons  
hills  
sun stroked  
thighs of sand stone

hills  
demons  
pelvic granite  
fallen archways

demons

## THE PRIEST'S SON

these five hills  
are the five demons  
that khandoba killed

says the priest's son  
a young boy  
who comes along as your guide  
as the schools have vacations

do you really believe that story  
you ask him

he doesn't reply  
but merely looks uncomfortable  
shrugs and looks away

and happens to notice  
a quick wink of a movement  
in a scanty patch of scruffy dry grass  
burnt brown in the sun  
and says

look  
there's a butterfly  
there

## THE BUTTERFLY

There is no story behind it.  
It is split like a second.  
It hinges around itself.

It has no future.  
It is pinned down to no past.  
It's a pun on the present.

It's a little yellow butterfly.  
It has taken these wretched hills  
under its wings.

Just a pinch of yellow,  
it opens before it closes  
and closes before it o

where is it



## A SCRATCH

what is god  
and what is stone  
the dividing line  
if it exists  
is very thin  
at jejuri  
and every other stone  
is god or his cousin

there is no crop  
other than god  
and god is harvested here  
around the year  
and round the clock  
out of the bad earth  
and the hard rock

that giant hunk of rock  
the size of a bedroom  
is khandoba's wife turned to stone  
the crack that runs across  
is the scar from his broadsword  
he struck her down with  
once in a fit of rage

scratch a rock  
and a legend springs

## AJAMIL AND THE TIGERS

The tiger people went to their king  
and said, 'We're starving.  
We've had nothing to eat,  
not a bite,  
for 15 days and 16 nights.  
Ajamil has got  
a new sheep dog.  
He cramps our style  
and won't let us get within a mile  
of meat.'

'That's shocking,'  
said the tiger king.  
'Why didn't you come to see me before?  
Make preparations for a banquet.  
I'm gonna teach that sheep dog a lesson he'll never forget.'  
'Hear hear,' said the tigers.  
'Careful,' said the queen.  
But he was already gone.  
Alone  
into the darkness before the dawn.

In an hour he was back,  
the good king.  
A black patch on his eye.  
His tail in a sling.  
And said, 'I've got it all planned  
now that I know the lie of the land.  
All of us will have to try.  
We'll outnumber the son of a bitch.  
And this time there will be no hitch.  
Because this time I shall be leading the attack.'

Quick as lightning  
the sheep dog was.  
He took them all in as prisoners of war,  
the 50 tigers and the tiger king,  
before they could get their paws  
on a single sheep.  
They never had a chance.  
The dog was in 51 places all at once.  
He strung them all out in a daisy chain  
and flung them in front of his boss in one big heap.

'Nice dog you got there, Ajamil,'  
said the tiger king.  
Looking a little ill  
and spitting out a tooth.  
'But there's been a bit of misunderstanding.  
We could've wiped out your herd in one clean sweep.  
But we were not trying to creep up on your sheep.  
We feel that means are more important than ends.  
We were coming to see you as friends.  
And that's the truth.'

The sheep dog was the type  
who had never told a lie in his life.  
He was built along simpler lines  
and he was simply disgusted.  
He kept on making frantic signs.  
But Ajamil, the good shepherd  
refused to meet his eyes  
and pretended to believe every single word  
of what the tiger king said.  
And seemed to be taken in by all the lies.



Ajamil cut them loose  
and asked them all to stay for dinner.  
It was an offer the tigers couldn't refuse.  
And after the lamb chops and the roast,  
when Ajamil proposed  
they sign a long term friendship treaty,  
all the tigers roared,  
'We couldn't agree with you more.'  
And swore they would be good friends all their lives  
as they put down the forks and the knives.

Ajamil signed a pact  
with the tiger people and sent them back.  
Laden with gifts of sheep, leather jackets and balls of wool.  
Ajamil wasn't a fool.  
Like all good shepherds he knew  
that even tigers have got to eat some time.  
A good shepherd sees to it they do.  
He is free to play a flute all day  
as well fed tigers and fat sheep drink from the same pond  
with a full stomach for a common bond.

## A SONG FOR A VAGHYA

It tore in two  
when I took  
this yellow scarf  
from the sun.  
I know it's only a half  
but I'll throw it away  
when I've found  
a better one.

I killed my mother  
for her skin.  
I must say  
it didn't take much  
to make this pouch  
I keep turmeric in.

It's my job to carry  
this can of oil.  
Yours to see  
it's always full.  
But if I can't beg  
I'll have to steal.  
Is that a deal?

Khandoba's temple  
rises with the day.  
But it must not fall  
with the night.

I'll hold it up  
with a flame for a prop.  
Don't turn me away.  
I must have my oil, mam.  
Give me a drop  
if you can't spare a gram.

This instrument  
has one string.  
And one godawful itch.  
As I scratch it,  
it gives me just one pitch.  
But if it plays  
just the one note,  
who am I to complain  
when all I've got  
is just a one word song  
inside my throat?

God is the word  
and I know it backwards.  
I know it as fangs  
inside my flanks.  
But I also know it  
as a lamb  
between my teeth,  
as a taste of blood  
upon my tongue.  
And this is the only song  
I've always sung.

## A SONG FOR A MURLI

look  
the moon has come down  
to graze along the hill top

you dare not ride off with it  
don't you see khandoba's brand on its flank  
you horse thief

look  
that's his name  
tattooed just below the left collar bone

keep your hands off khandoba's woman  
you old lecher  
let's see the colour of your money first



## THE RESERVOIR

There isn't a drop of water  
in the great reservoir the Peshwas built.

There is nothing in it.  
Except a hundred years of silt.

## A LITTLE PILE OF STONES

find a place  
where the ground  
is not too uneven  
and the wind  
not too strong

put a stone  
on top of another  
find a third  
to rest on the two  
and so on

choose each one  
with the others in mind  
each one just  
the right size  
the right weight

if you choose  
your first stone well  
the kind you can  
build upon  
the stones will stand

god bless you  
young woman  
may you be  
just as lucky  
as you are smart

go home now  
with your husband  
may you find  
happiness together  
and may it last

## MAKARAND

Take my shirt off  
and go in there to do pooja?  
No thanks.

Not me.  
But you go right ahead  
if that's what you want to do.

Give me the matchbox  
before you go  
will you?

I will be out in the courtyard  
where no one will mind  
if I smoke.

## THE TEMPLE RAT

The temple rat uncurls its tail  
from around the longer middle prong.  
Oozes halfway down the trident  
like a thick gob of black blood.

Stops on the mighty shoulder  
of the warrior god  
for a quick look around.  
A ripple in the divine muscle.

Scarce a glance  
at the fierce eyes and the war paint  
on the face of Malhari Martand,  
and it's gone.

The temple rat blinks  
as it loops down the chain hung from the stone ceiling  
and its eyes shine among heavy metal links  
licked by highlights.

It slips down a slope  
and looks brassily over the edge  
of the bigger bell  
at the green sparks shaking in the glass

bangles massed in the hands  
of the teen age bride on her knees,  
crushing bananas on the top  
of the stone linga.

And having noticed  
the trace of a smile on the priest's face,  
buried under a grey, week deep beard,  
the temple rat

disappears in a corner of the sanctum  
just behind the big temple drum.  
Not a minute too soon.  
Because just then the bell springs into action.



## A KIND OF A CROSS

Tail tucked between its legs  
and legs tucked under a metal plated body,  
the bull calf sits on a pedestal  
in the temple courtyard.

You stroke a horn. Thump him on the hump  
and look up at the strange instrument of torture  
that even the holy bull calf  
has turned his tail upon.

It's a kind of cross that rises,  
on creaky joints, above a stone platform.  
It's a kind of a cross with two cross bars  
you lie between and come apart,

limb from limb.  
As the one with spikes and hooks  
stays where it is  
and the one with you on swings around.

Hills and temples dance around.  
Bull calves and tortoises swim around.  
Constellations wheel overhead like vultures  
in one mad carousel.

Except of course that they don't.  
It's illegal.  
It's the wrong time of the day  
for constellations anyway.

No screaming drop of blood  
firebrigades down the good wood  
ten laned with time  
and deepening grain.

With a fingernail, you try  
to pry a rivet from the sirloin.  
And hurriedly, with the ball of a thumb,  
to smooth a dent from the brass rump.

## THE CUPBOARD

broken glass is held together  
with bits and pieces  
of an old yellowed newspaper

each rectangle  
of the doorframe  
is an assemblage

insecure setsquares of glass  
jagged silvers thrusting down  
precarious trapeziums

the cupboard is full  
of shelf upon shelf  
of gold gods in tidy rows

you can see the golden gods  
beyond the strips  
of stock exchange quotations

they look out at you  
from behind slashed editorials  
and promises of eternal youth

you see a hand of gold  
behind opinion  
stiff with starch

as one would expect  
there is naturally  
a lock upon the door

## YESHWANT RAO

Are you looking for a god?  
I know a good one.  
His name is Yeshwant Rao  
and he's one of the best.  
Look him up  
when you are in Jejuri next.

Of course he's only a second class god  
and his place is just outside the main temple.  
Outside even of the outer wall.  
As if he belonged  
among the tradesmen and the lepers.

I've known gods  
prettier faced  
or straighter laced.  
Gods who soak you for your gold.  
Gods who soak you for your soul.  
Gods who make you walk  
on a bed of burning coal.  
Gods who put a child inside your wife.  
Or a knife inside your enemy.  
Gods who tell you how to live your life,  
double your money  
or triple your land holdings.  
Gods who can barely suppress a smile  
as you crawl a mile for them.  
Gods who will see you drown  
if you won't buy them a new crown.  
And although I'm sure they're all to be praised,  
they're either too symmetrical  
or too theatrical for my taste.



Yeshwant Rao,  
mass of basalt,  
bright as any post box,  
the shape of protoplasm  
or a king size lava pie  
thrown against the wall,  
without an arm, a leg  
or even a single head.

Yeshwant Rao.  
He's the god you've got to meet.  
If you're short of a limb,  
Yeshwant Rao will lend you a hand  
and get you back on your feet.

Yeshwant Rao  
does nothing spectacular.  
He doesn't promise you the earth  
or book your seat on the next rocket to heaven.  
But if any bones are broken,  
you know he'll mend them.  
He'll make you whole in your body  
and hope your spirit will look after itself.  
He is merely a kind of a bone setter.  
The only thing is,  
as he himself has no heads, hands and feet,  
he happens to understand you a little better.

## THE BLUE HORSE

The toothless singer  
opens her mouth.  
Shorts the circuits  
in her haywire throat.  
A shower of sparks  
flies off her half burnt tongue.

With a face fallen in on itself  
and a black skin burnt blacker in the sun,  
the drummer goes blue in the face  
as he thumps and whacks the tambourine  
and joins the chorus in a keyless passion.  
His pockmarked half brother  
twiddles, tweaks and twangs  
on the one string thing.  
God's own children  
making music.



You turn to the priest  
who has been good enough to arrange  
that bit of sacred cabaret at his own house  
and ask him,

‘The singers sang of a blue horse.  
How is it then, that the picture on your wall  
shows a white one?’

‘Looks blue to me.’

says the priest,  
shifting a piece of betel nut  
from the left to the right of his mouth.  
And draws an end of a nutcracker  
along the underbelly of the noble animal.  
Picking on a shade of blue  
that many popular painters like to use  
to suggest shadow on an object otherwise white.

The tambourine continues to beat its breast.

## CHAITANYA

a herd of legends  
on a hill slope  
looked up from its grazing  
when chaitanya came in sight

the hills remained still  
when chaitanya  
was passing by  
a cowbell tinkled  
when he disappeared from view  
and the herd of legends  
returned to its grazing

## BETWEEN JEJURI AND THE RAILWAY STATION

You leave the little temple town  
with its sixty three priests inside their sixty three houses  
huddled at the foot of the hill  
with its three hundred pillars, five hundred steps and eighteen arches.  
You pass the sixtyfourth house of the temple dancer  
who owes her prosperity to another skill.  
A skill the priest's son would rather not talk about.  
A house he has never stepped inside  
and hopes he never will.  
You pass by the ruin of the temple but the resident bitch is nowhere around.  
You pass by the Gorakshanath Hair Cutting Saloon.  
You pass by the Mhalsakant Cafe  
and the flour mill.  
And that's it.  
The end.  
You've left the town behind  
with a coconut in your hand,  
a priest's visiting card in your pocket  
and a few questions knocking in your head.  
You stop halfway between  
Jejuri on the one and the railway station on the other hand.  
You stop dead  
and stand still like a needle in a trance.  
Like a needle that has struck a perfect balance between equal scales  
with nothing left to add or shed.

## THE RAILWAY STATION

What has stopped you in your tracks  
and taken your breath away  
is the sight  
of a dozen cocks and hens in a field of jowar  
in a kind of harvest dance. The craziest you've ever seen.  
Where seven jump straight up to at least four times their height  
as five come down with grain in their beaks.

up            a<sup>n</sup> d            do<sup>w</sup>            a<sup>n</sup> d            &            d  
&            wo<sup>d</sup>            a<sup>n</sup>            p<sup>u</sup>            a<sup>d</sup>            do<sup>w</sup>            &            u<sup>p</sup>  
a<sup>n</sup>            u<sup>p</sup>            a<sup>n</sup>            d            o<sup>w</sup>            &            u<sup>p</sup>            a<sup>n</sup>            d            u<sup>p</sup>  
d<sup>o</sup>            &            u<sup>p</sup>            a<sup>n</sup>            d            do<sup>w</sup>            a<sup>n</sup>            d            u<sup>p</sup>            a<sup>n</sup>            d            o<sup>w</sup>            &            &  
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d            o<sup>n</sup>            a<sup>n</sup>            d            a<sup>n</sup>            d            u<sup>p</sup>

And there you stand forgetting how silly you must look  
with a priest on your left shoulder as it were  
and a station master on your right.



## THE RAILWAY STATION

### 1 : the indicator

a wooden saint  
in need of paint

the indicator  
has turned inward  
ten times over

swallowed the names  
of all the railway  
stations it knows

removed its hands  
from its face  
and put them away  
in its pockets

if it knows when  
the next train's due  
it gives no clue

the clockface adds  
its numerals

the total is zero

### 2 : the station dog

the spirit of the place  
lives inside the mangy body  
of the station dog

doing penance for the last  
three hundred years under  
the tree of arrivals and departures

the dog opens his right eye  
just long enough to look at you and see  
whether you're a man a demon a demigod

or the eight armed railway timetable come  
to stroke him on the head  
with a healing hand

and to take him to heaven  
the dog decides  
that day is not yet



### 3 : the tea stall

the young novice at the tea stall  
has taken a vow of silence

when you ask him a question  
he exorcises you

by sprinkling dishwater in your face  
and continues with his ablutions in the sink

and certain ceremonies connected  
with the washing of cups and saucers

### 4 : the station master

the booking clerk believes in the doctrine  
of the next train  
when conversation turns to time  
he takes his tongue  
hands it to you across the counter  
and directs you to a superior  
intelligence

the two headed station master  
belongs to a sect  
that rejects every timetable  
not published in the year the track was laid  
as apocryphal  
but interprets the first timetable  
with a freedom that allows him to read  
every subsequent timetable between  
the lines of its text

he keeps looking anxiously at the setting sun  
as if the sunset were a part of a secret ritual  
and he didn't want anything to go wrong with it  
at the last minute  
finally he nods like a stroke  
between a yes and a no  
and says  
all timetables ever published  
along with all timetables yet to be published  
are simultaneously valid  
at any given time and on any given track  
insofar as all the timetables were inherent  
in the one printed  
when the track was laid

and goes red  
in both his faces  
at once

## 5 : vows

slaughter a goat before the clock  
smash a coconut on the railway track  
smear the indicator with the blood of a cock  
bathe the station master in milk  
and promise you will give  
a solid gold toy train to the booking clerk  
if only someone would tell you  
when the next train is due



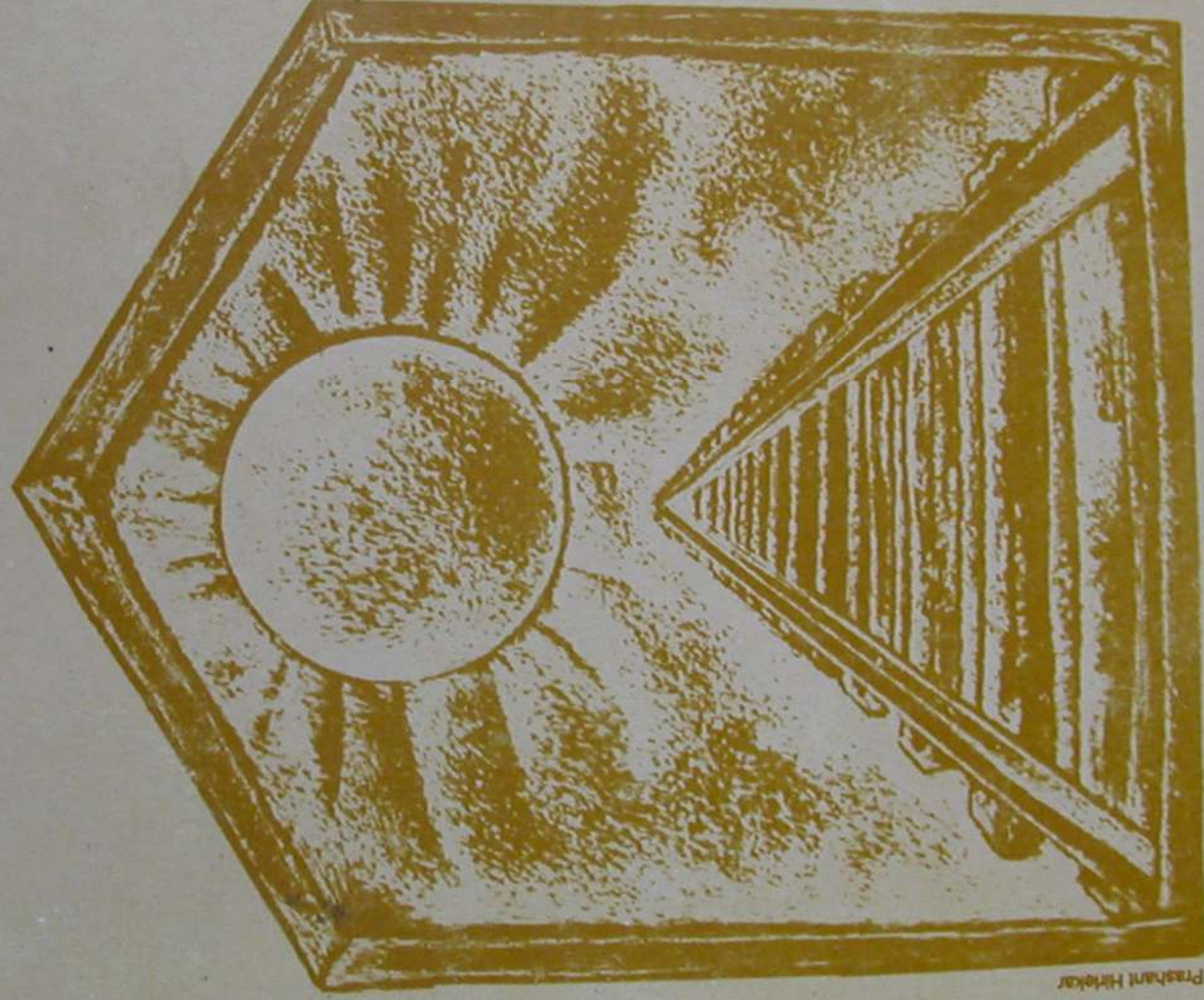
**6 : the setting sun**

the setting sun  
touches upon the horizon  
at a point where the rails  
like the parallels  
of a prophecy  
appear to meet

the setting sun  
large as a wheel

Arun Kolatkar was born in 1932, in Kolhapur, and works as a graphic artist in Bombay. Although his poems have appeared in magazines and anthologies since 1955, Jejuri, published by Clearing House, was his first book.

It was awarded the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for 1977. Arun Kolatkar's *Kavita*, a collection of his Marathi poems, was published by Pras in 1977.



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