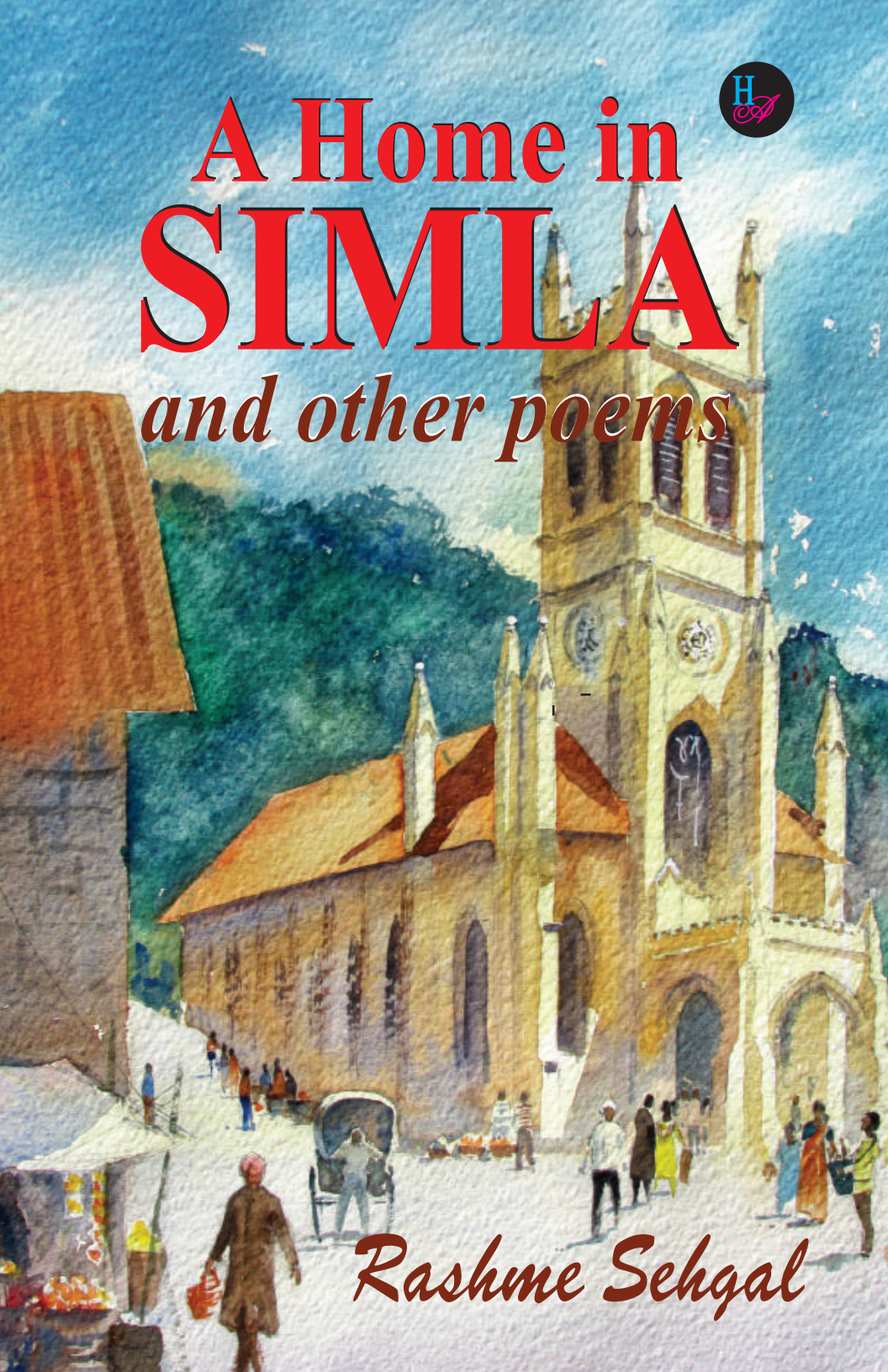
A Home in SIMLA

and other poems



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Preface

I wrote these poems during a lifetime that stretched from the neem trees of Agra, the shimmering lakes of Agartala and the dancing warriors of Mokokchung to my many homes across the country.

However, what remain central to my life experience are my recollections of the deodar and pine-covered hills of Simla and Bhajji House, home to my grandparents. It was our refuge between my father's frequent transfers to different places.

Ironically, it was the home my refugee grandparents had themselves fled to from newly formed Pakistan during the violent Partition of India. As refugees they were impoverished, left with only their faith as a guiding compass.

Hidden within these recollections are their experiences and my dear mother's life struggles. There are poems about the events I witnessed during my many years as a journalist: the frenetic worship of the 'Sati' Roop Kanwar, the traumatic ongoing Kashmir conflict, police firing in Nagarpat (Ahmedabad) and senseless killings of many young women and men. All through many cataclysmic events, I have watched priests parroting "prayers two thousand years old," and heavens bending down to "hear the prayers of the rich."

I end with a passionate tribute to trees that have surrounded me through these years. The cherry, elder, keekar, willow, gingko, mango, amaltas, pomegranate, pear, walnut, chestnut, oak, date, gulmohar, peepul, poplar, tamarind, sal – all leading to the beauty of the stately trees of Ganeshpuri that: "Surge out of the roof top/To touch the fissures of a leaden sky."

RASHME SEHGAL

Introduction

I knew Rashme as a classmate when we were both attending Loreto Convent Tara Hall School in Simla (now called "Shimla"). She lived with her brother and sister at her uncle's home, Bhajji House, in a neighbourhood known as Lower Kaithu. I lived in Snow View, one of the many sprawling 19th century, colonial buildings in what used to be the summer capital of India. Our school was situated just above a "sudden death" steep climb that descended all the way from Cart Road to Anandale—the only field flat enough to accommodate Ram Lila crowds around Dussehra.

We ran up and down these slopes everyday and, on our way, plucked apricots and apples from branches of fruit trees trailing over the slopes of these hills. Our lives were like one long hike of never-ending mango picnics with groups of friends that walked and talked and laughed with abandonment at the sheer joy of being together. I call them "mango picnics" because that is about all that we carried with us by way of nutrition. Our goal was to find a mountain spring (*jharna)* to cool our stash of mangoes for about an hour or so. After that, we relished them to their last peel before proceeding on our long trudge back home. We did not have much, nor did we need much because we had our hiding places, our local haunts, our favourite trees, our *gol paharies*

and the ubiquitous *khads* covered with thick layers of pine and deodar leaves to walk on. It was a wonderful period of our lives with few cares and responsibilities. Rashme's following lines immortalize characters such as "Balram Das the bakery man," who "arrived every morning/carrying a box full of smiles," or the grim figure of the compounder pondering over potions in a dark dispensary precariously located on a reclining slope:

> The dispensary was located on a steep slope,
> a dark looking building with a bespectacled compounder
> dispensing potions and powders of frightening intensity.
> We ran past it, not daring to look back,
> hoping the road would soon open up to a series of yellow buildings
> covered by a mosaic of apricot blossoms in full bloom.

I recall Rashme's mother and aunt welcoming us to their home, and I cannot forget the *halwais* and their *mithai* that always seemed so close and yet so far away from us. Rashme reminisces over the famous Lower Kaithu *mithaiwallas* in the following lines:

> Our crossroad had three halwai shops
> every child in this vicinity knew when
> the halwai cooked what *mithai* at what hour.
> We lacked the money to make these purchases,
> and so, all we could do was wait
> for a miracle to occur, and for one piece of *mithai*
> to fall into our open mouths.

Rashme has been writing ever since she can remember. She started her career as a poet and short story writer. From there, she was appointed as a young journalist trainee with the *Times of India,* and then went on to become a well-respected correspondent with *The Indian Post, The Independent, The Telegraph, The Asian Age* and many others. She was always passionate about words, and once, when I visited her in Delhi, I saw her surrounded with newspapers from everywhere.

She excitedly let out a secret, "I have met someone who says he can write better than W.H. Auden!"

"And?" I asked.

"And, I think he does!"

That was it. I think it was this love for words and their creativity and magic that attracted her to Anil Saari Arora, journalist, poet, dramatist, 1997 winner of the National Award for best cine critic, author of *Seduced by the Familiar: Narration and Meaning in Indian Popular Cinema,* and son of Arjun Arora—a highly respected trade union leader and co-founder of the Communist Party of India (CPI).

Rashme married Anil at a very early age, and from there embarked on a career and a journey that not only took her to many places, gave her the opportunity to interview many, made her aware of desperate social inequalities and injustices, but also placed her on a rollercoaster of a ride where she constantly struggled to create her own mark, retain her own identity, find the time and the energy to love and nurture her three children, manage family finances, and ensure that her head always remained above water. Some of the landmark events she covered during her career include

the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley, the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, the Kargil War, and more recently, the Taj Corridor scam. No easy task that she performed with courage, fortitude, and a level of integrity that taught her never to mince her words:

Bhuja scampered like a frightened hare.
The wall of people did not break.
My husband, Ram Dhan, dragged her by her arm,
Picking up an axe, he severed her neck in one stroke.

Feet scalding in mud
Mouth scalding in mud
Hearts scalding in mud
As her blood gushed into the earth.

Daughters must be kept locked inside a cavern
Never to be allowed to see the light of day.
Let no man's shadow cross their path
Let them breathe in a pyre of gloom.

All along, while going through this incredible pace of things, while using words as tools to eloquently write her columns and opinion pieces, while witnessing indescribable suffering during riots and killings, while taking care of the ones who fell sick in her family, she poured her heart into verses written from the sidelines—verses that did not take front centre stage in her profession, but that expressed what made her what she was: a pillar of strength, tender and deep enough to relate to human suffering. The following lines poignantly reflect a daughter's pain and anxiety:

The great Indian summer is a destroyer of homes.
It almost destroyed mine.
It left my mother so ill
she had to move to the cooler mountains of Simla
to find her feet again.
Oh city of tall pine trees and long evening walks!
I used to accompany her.
I used to hold her hand and plead,
'Get well! Get well soon!'

It is a great privilege for me to be the one to introduce this collection of poems by Rashme Sehgal, a friend, journalist, mother, writer, poet, and—like me—a woman. Many of these were published earlier in *The Debonair, Thought*, and the Sahitya Akademi's journal, *Indian Literature*, but it is for the first time that they are appearing all together in an anthology.

The book is divided into four sections:

1. "Bhajji House" includes poems about Rashme's childhood and places lived—a nostalgic collection written in 2016 during a summer break at her daughter's home in Geneva.

2. "Shame 1" is a section on events that she witnessed and covered as a journalist.

3. "Shame 2" deals with personal challenges, losses, and social injustices.

4. "Trees" is a collection of poems written in 2006 during a week long silent retreat in an ashram in the village of Ganeshpuri near Mumbai. The participants in the retreat were encouraged to spend time at the library where Rashme

came across a book on trees that described how they helped provide us with the alphabet, and how most civilizations were built around them. The poems are like an "ode" to natural forests that are now being destroyed, and trees that are becoming scarce.

These poems reflect long periods of silence interspersed with feverish activity, along with reflection on the beauties of nature. They describe what we, as humans, are doing to our landscape, and how we are losing our precious farmers:

The distance between the ruler and ruled is hazy
Each professes to ameliorate the sins of the other
The poor swear they will grow rich.

The rich experiment with living in mud hovels,
Who then will plough our shrinking fields?
Graze the cattle, sodden shoes in hand,
Sing songs in praise of mother nature,
Follow the birds bursting forth in the sky
Watch the seed emerge from the soil
Grown from calloused hands?

Covering assignments was a saddening experience for Rashme because she witnessed inequities, and heard the voices of the poor and dispossessed. In poem after poem, she captures their pain:

The village women, heads covered circumspectly,
Fearfully recount their all too familiar tale of grief.
Lands snatched by bullying landlords
Sons implicated in false cases,

Homes looted, young daughters kidnapped
Never to be seen again
"Where was the government machinery?
Where was the district magistrate?" the journalist queried.
A Dhritrashtra blind to their misery.

Rashme says that she follows the dictum spelled out by Robert Frost that poetry is "a way of remembering what it would impoverish us to forget." Keeping this in mind, she always attempted to take time off to scribble notes about her varied journalistic experiences: pieces of paper tucked away into drawers, forgotten under the pressures of a hectic career. "These poems, however, refused to disappear, possibly because they possessed an inner voice that could not be stilled:" a voice that could not die, and that still cries out:

The only living creatures to have survived
The atomic blast at Hiroshima were four gingko trees....
Their solitude echoes through hills
Without borders. Knowing they are immortal
They are deserving of praise: offer them fruits
And sweetened waters: Offer them praises
For they stave off death standing at each man's door.

Canada NILAMBRI SINGH

BHAJJI HOUSE