



# I Am the Dancing

Mani G. Iyer



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# **I Am the Dancing**

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*To Amma and Appa*

## Acknowledgements

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## Mango Memories

Summer is the season of the mango,  
tangy green to luscious yellow—  
our Alphonso,  
the undisputed king of the realm,  
resting between layers of hay in baskets  
blanketed by burlap, breathes out  
*mango, mango, mango*  
into our tiny Bombay flat.

Before the Sunday meal, my father's ritual—  
painstaking mango picking,  
demoting ones with any sign of green,  
promoting those ready to face the world.  
To pick a few from that top echelon,  
he sniffed the royalty for the right ripeness  
while massaging their plump bodies for mellowness.

The chosen were lined up for my mother's cleaver.  
Four slices close to the core: front, back, two laterals.

After we gorged on *puris* and savoury vegetable curry  
it was Alphonso time.  
We skimmed the succulent sweet meat  
until the skins sagged. Then we mauled  
the core, gripping it in our right palms,

biting into the clinging flesh as close  
to its fibrous scalp as our incisors allowed,  
squeezing every bit of goodness with thumb and index finger,  
going bottom-up and licking the ooze gathered

until the core offered nothing more.

## Tchaikovsky Square

We met on the parapet edging  
a building promising us classical music  
from one of its Juliet balconies.

With the bustling bazaar in the square blanketed  
for the night, the vigilance of a lone streetlamp,  
and loose cigarettes from the *paan* shop across,  
we engaged in teen banter—  
pundit-ed on cricket and soccer,  
guffawed over jokes morphing from silly  
to sillier to dirty to dirtier.

Around nine, the old chap, nursing a cognac,  
lifted an arm to place the needle  
on a groove. Music descended soft at first,  
then for an eternity, loud and clear.

When it was over,  
we clapped, we cheered, we demanded an encore.  
Gazing at our smoke clouds soar  
then disappear into the starless Bombay sky,  
we fell silent to the decadence  
courtesy of an unseen, second-floor resident  
we named Tchaikovsky.

## Dr. Ansari Road

Right next to the roadside shrine  
of Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity,  
I expect him: a tattered heap  
of flesh, waving  
flies off his bruised face  
with the stump of one hand,  
the other on his begging bowl.

The copper bowl brims with coins  
dropped by they who hurry away  
before he blesses them.  
Still, he smiles,  
his arms raised in a *namasté*.

I never see his legs—  
he has none.  
Like clockwork he shows up  
on his roller board,  
monsoons never a damper.

When he does keel over,  
disinfected air will greet me,  
a day before another  
leprous beggar appears  
with bowl and board,  
ready to fatten the flies.

## Some Things Don't Change

Squatting low and rectangular, the dumpster  
bares its gut into which my mother,  
her nose covered by the corner of her sari,  
frees mice from mousetraps,  
dumps the usual potpourri of human trash,  
cockroaches whacked by a rolled-up Sunday *Times of India*,  
and anything else unfit for the homeless.

The corrugated iron container flourishes  
beside a gutter bursting with a sludge  
of rancid food and piss from patrons  
of the popular Kings' Bar next door.  
With animal faeces festooning it, a fetor  
hangs forever, a beacon to Dr. Ansari Road.

A month ago, thanks to a councillor standing  
for the second term, a new brown dumpster arrived.  
Its surroundings spruced up, its road marker painted greener,  
the dumpster did not garner disgust for one week  
before its cover was stolen for scrap.

## Join Us for a Beer

Come summer, we haunted a pub at the back  
of Oasis, a seedy diner. Sometimes,  
the moon joined in the ambience:  
stray dogs sniffing around picnic tables,  
smell of *pakor*s frying and cigarette smoke,  
high-spirited voices of men cooling off  
a sweltering Bombay.

One time, a silence fell with all eyes  
on a new patron at the head of our table—  
a huge rat dressed in worn grey, waiting  
to be served by one of the frozen waiters.

“Kill it with a stone,” a voice panicked.  
“No, that is not how you treat a guest,” another quipped.

I, closest to the rat, poured some Kingfisher  
onto a saucer emptied of peanuts,  
and offered it to our well-tailed guest  
who drained the welcome brew and waited for me  
to bend down and pour some more. Four refills later,

the rat took a step back and, without tipping,  
scurried for the cover of whatever dark  
our jungle and her concrete laws had to offer.

## A Crow Speaks

The rare times I sat in my father's armchair  
by the iron-barred window, the same crow  
alighted on the casement facing me.

In my vacant view of the little sky  
away from the walls blighted by rain,  
leaking through the roof every monsoon,  
it steadied its feet on the rotting wood  
and carried out a monologue of caws.

This day, I heard it shrill,  
"Young man, you are imprisoned."  
Ruffled, I rejoined,  
"I can go out the door whenever I please."  
The crow jerked its neck and shot back,  
"It has nothing to do with the bars."

Escape, I did. Decades later,

the crow is right again,  
now that I see no sky.

## Photograph of Me on My Birthday

When I visit the city of my birth,  
my only baby picture in a cardboard mat  
draws me to the one cupboard  
exuding mothballs, home.

A year old in pinstriped shorts and short  
sleeves, baby fat and curls,  
I lie down garlanded with marigolds,  
to make auspicious a boy's special day  
and keep all evil at bay.

The black and white was shot in a studio  
where my mother, standing next to the camera above me,  
clapped and cooed for the smile  
that did not happen.

These days, I turn to touch  
those unblemished eyes,  
staring into the glare and clamour,  
pleading with the photographer to hurry  
and take that plastic wreath off my neck.



## A Grottoed Universe

i.

It's my lucky day  
if the toothpaste agrees  
to land on the bristles.

ii.

My brown eyes offer  
no clue to the stranger  
whose proffered hand  
I do not shake.

iii.

Having once bumped into my sleeping dog,  
she now scampers for any cover  
when I approach her, treat in hand.

iv.

I touch my face a thousand places,  
have it described a thousand ways  
but no image comes to mind.

v.

Assuming you're still close to me,  
I utter sweet nothings  
and blush to an unfamiliar  
*Excuse me, sir.*

## Remembering Thérèse

You sat across from me,  
surrounded by voices—  
Amharic, English, and French.

The sun punishing  
my tunnel vision with glare  
and blur, I saw something.  
Was it a hat?  
I asked and you shouted,  
*He can see my hat!*  
*He can see my hat!*

We talked about our homelands.  
You missed Quebec, her poutine,  
her tourtière, and I,  
the Bombay I carry with me.  
You leaned across, took my hand,  
and guided my surprised fingers  
over your hairless head.

A year later, while you were waiting out  
your life, refusing to be seen,  
I badly wanted to see you  
to tell you that on sunless days,  
I can see much more.

## **I'm No Different**

*for Richard Gemme*

I meet him for the first time.  
He sits across from me.  
I don't see him,  
never will.

He speaks a few words,  
busy cracking  
unruly corn chips,  
into bite-sized pieces.

He lavishes guacamole dip on one,  
places it between my fingers,  
patient and tender.

In every one of the many  
he offers me, I savour  
the rare zing of humanity.

## The Book Collector

From Achebe to Marquez to Vonnegut, they live  
neglected and disorderly in my bookcases—

books that languished in small town bookshops  
with rickety stairs winding dingier

books I plucked out of manicured bookstores  
boasting couches, scones, and cappuccinos

books I housed in neighbourhoods right for them,  
the new ones causing a stir or two

books I dusted on Sunday afternoons  
one at a time, trumpeting random bios,

books that strayed elsewhere and I bothered  
to give them back their orderly lives

books whose words faded over the years,  
then their spines, their covers, their lodgings

books whose paper, when caressed, I dream  
I worshipped with my eyes.

## Love in the Air

On the sofa for two  
under dim lights, we snuggle.  
She reads a poem to me  
as she does every night.

This November night, Hafiz declares:  
*the subject tonight is love*  
*and for tomorrow night as well.*  
*As a matter of fact, I know*  
*of no better topic*  
*for us to discuss until we die!*

I imagine Hafiz  
seated in a Persian garden,  
his face caressed by a breeze  
carrying the scent of roses  
with hints of soil pounded earlier  
by much needed rain,  
and he is seeing  
in his beloved's eyes  
what I hear  
in my wife's voice.

## Driving North through New England

What my retinas cannot  
capture, my wife captures.

Leaves  
dazzle and purple.

She has nothing to add  
for miles, miles.

I picture a pale grey  
not-much-to-look-at nakedness,  
birches standing solemn—

my wife startles me,  
tells me a bride is driving this sky blue  
car in the left lane, radiant.

## Back to Life

My wife parks me away from carts, shoppers, and racks  
of handbags, dresses, and intimate apparel.

I hold my cane upright in front, palms  
cupping its handle. I pose  
as a mannequin with unblemished skin,  
well-groomed hair of an unfading colour,  
and a perfect sum of well-chiselled parts. Clad  
in custom-fit, colour-matched, clean clothes,  
I slowly slip into rigor mortis.

Someone touches my cane, then my hand.  
“He’s alive, he’s alive!” a child shrieks  
when I sneeze three times in a row.  
“Let’s go,” my wife whispers, kissing me.

I reach for her right elbow  
and tap, tap out of the store.



# No Laughing Matter

*for Rupert Spira*

I pull back curtain after curtain  
to glimpse you outside the open window  
standing like you had nowhere to go  
and looking at ease around me.

So, are you the one sensing  
the sunniness of an afternoon  
and the growing dark of an autumn evening?

The one getting the whiff  
of a neighbor's grill at work  
and rains slaking the parched earth?

The one helping my index finger  
locate bump dots on the microwave oven  
and recognize Braille constellations?

And are you really the one feeding  
lines to my newborn poems?

For the reminder,  
All you had to do, my dear,  
was laugh.

## The Dance

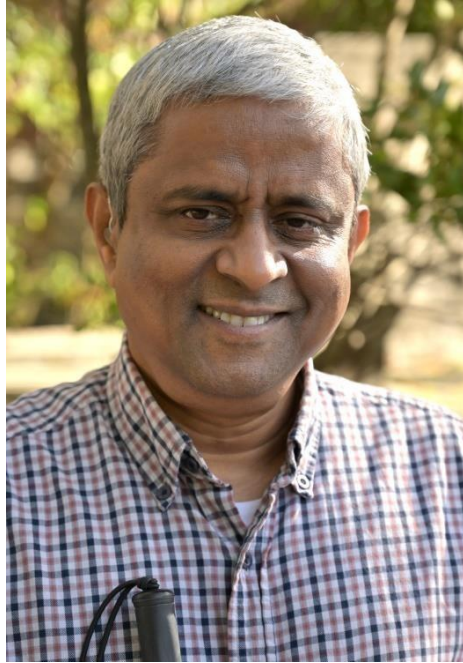
Dressed in the dazzle of sequins  
and a thousand rainbows,  
the Goddess dances to a silent score  
she alone knows.

Out of the throbbing:  
I appear, I linger, I disappear.  
Not just me, but the cloud  
and the wind and the wave,  
the butterfly and the whale,  
the dandelion and the sequoia,  
the loon and her cry.

She lifts her foot,  
sways her hand,  
twists her torso,  
pirouettes.

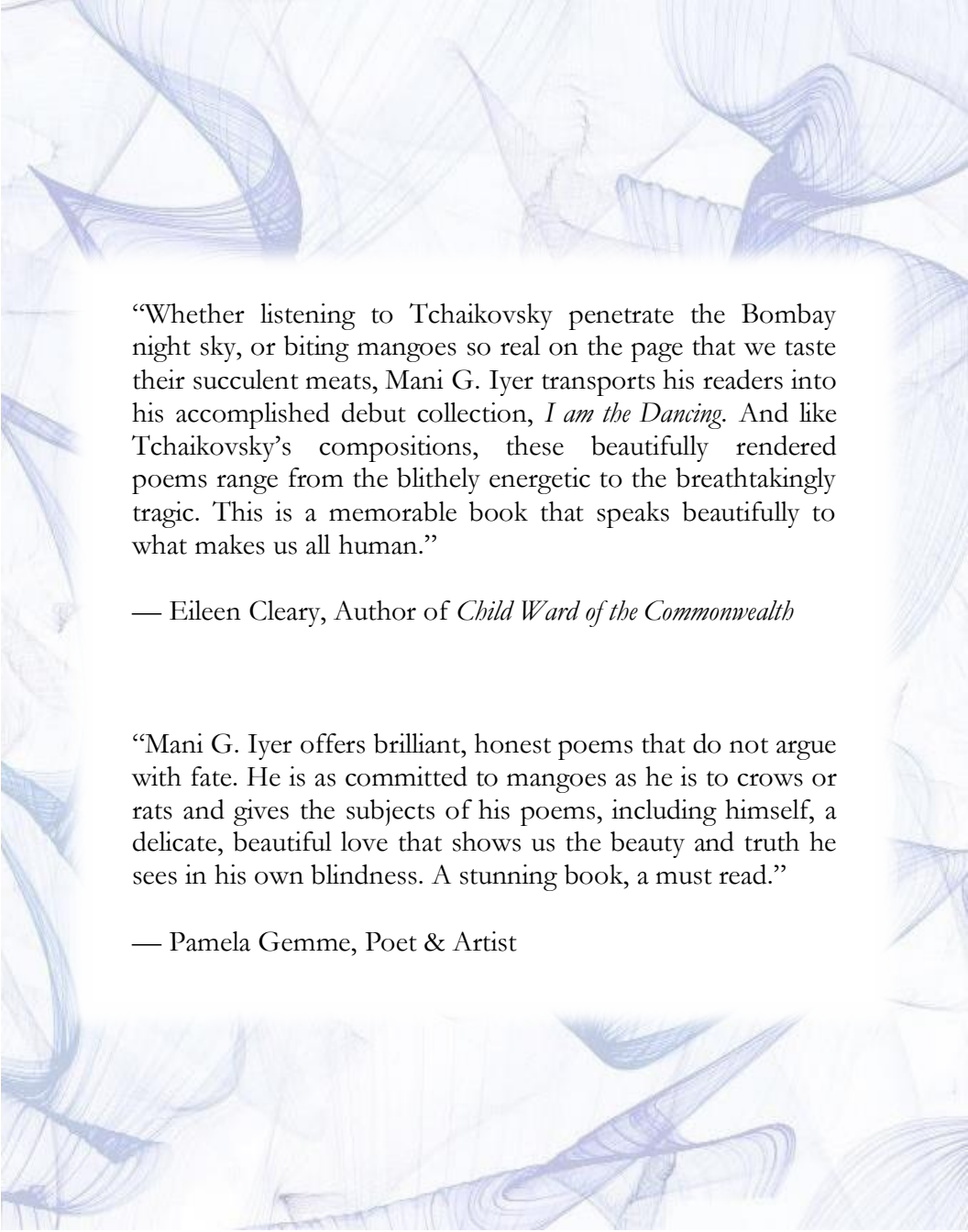
In tune with her,  
*I am the dancer,*  
*I am the dance,*  
*I am the dancing*





**Photo courtesy:** Phoebe Darlington

**Mani G. Iyer** was born and raised in Mumbai, India and now lives near Boston. He is deafblind due to Usher Syndrome, a rare progressive genetic disorder. A former software engineer, he has a graduate degree in Computer Science and an MFA in Poetry from Lesley University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Mani is currently learning Braille at the Hadley Institute for the Blind. His poems have appeared in several poetry journals.



“Whether listening to Tchaikovsky penetrate the Bombay night sky, or biting mangoes so real on the page that we taste their succulent meats, Mani G. Iyer transports his readers into his accomplished debut collection, *I am the Dancing*. And like Tchaikovsky’s compositions, these beautifully rendered poems range from the blithely energetic to the breathtakingly tragic. This is a memorable book that speaks beautifully to what makes us all human.”

— Eileen Cleary, Author of *Child Ward of the Commonwealth*

“Mani G. Iyer offers brilliant, honest poems that do not argue with fate. He is as committed to mangoes as he is to crows or rats and gives the subjects of his poems, including himself, a delicate, beautiful love that shows us the beauty and truth he sees in his own blindness. A stunning book, a must read.”

— Pamela Gemme, Poet & Artist