

Mithu Sen: In House Adoption



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10 January to 25 February 2012

Galerie Steph and Nature Morte, Singapore

Foreword

Art engages the senses and our reactions are instinctive. The first time I saw Mithu's work in Berlin, I was immediately drawn to it. Her use of colours, the graphic and erotic nature of the work: all immediately intrigued me with their playful but calculated and thoughtful juxtapositions.

It has been said that Mithu's art is a test of aesthetic endurance. She is always pushing the limits of our 'capacity to tolerate the onslaught of her imagination'. In my experience, Mithu's art is beautiful and attractive, if not challenging. In some cases, it is simply whimsical and joyous, and always

possesses a mischievous and mysterious humor.

It is indeed a privilege to provide Mithu her first solo exhibition in Singapore. She has created works for the exhibition notwithstanding numerous competing demands from international museums, galleries and endless travel. I must also say a huge thank you to Peter Nagy of Nature Morte. This exhibition could not have happened without his unstinting help and generosity.

Stephanie Tham
Singapore, January 2012

The Precarious Pursuits of Mithu Sen

Art can be anything that an artist says it is. With infinite possibilities, the significance of what an artist chooses to deem as art depends on their commitment to their chosen forms, images and materials, and the sustained commitment to these chosen parameters. Commitment can only be evidenced through the passage of time. While we want to see artists change and grow over time, we also want to see consistency in their work, so that the commitments are visible, so that their works build into a canon with cohesiveness. It's a tightrope that isn't easy to stay on. But the best artists do stay on, trusting in their intuitions and balanced by a strong sense of self.

Mithu Sen's commitment has come to be based on the mixed media collage, usually on handmade papers but sometimes on photographs

or other materials. Her primary language is that of drawing as the foundations of the collages are immediate, executed with an alacrity, but also precision and spontaneity. Mithu's subjects are diverse: self-portraits, flora and fauna, architecture, still lifes of objects. What binds everything together is an emotional commitment Mithu has with her subjects, an identification with these images to act as ciphers for her own interior life, to explore her own sensitivities, to divulge both the successes and failures in her personal and professional lives. These burdens she carries for all the world to see through her works, making her walk across the tightrope of life and art that much more precipitous, her accomplishments that much more impressive.

Peter Nagy
New Delhi, December 2011

In House Adoption by Gayatri Sinha

The night in the Dooars, India's tea growing riverine plains builds up through layers of darkness. Like an elevated table top, the leafy velvety surface of the acreage of tea creates the illusion of layers of density. Here the creatures of the jungle tread but carefully, in the magic of the darkness and its incipient fears. Pain racks still dot the gardens, a reminder of the colonial master's lashings of the intransigent tribal worker, stretched and whipped on its rotating frame.

From Siliguri in the Dooars, to the small town of Burdwan to Santiniketan, Tagore's arcadian art school in Birbhum, Bengal from where she graduated with an MFA in 1997: Mithu Sen's journey to the metropolis has been routed through the semi-rural, with its proximity to nature. Sen's appearance on the Indian art scene marks a particular moment in time. Within the last decade, feminist practices have slipped into a post feminist position, the narrow confines of 'Indian' have made way for the vagaries of global art circuits, and the artist's language is informed as much by mythos, autobiography, narratives of nation, gender, and the demos of the street, as much as new media, and the

play of technology. Over and above this, Sen touches, and turns inside out expectations, norms and tropes of acceptability.

In effect Mithu Sen's appearance comes at the end of a long line of disciplines. The heterosexual view of the erotic body, in the hands of the male artist and the challenge to such domination by the feminist critic are very much a part of modern art historical discourse in India. I would like to suggest that she moves beyond the well argued position of feminism to autobiographically maneuver a fresh set of propositions. For Sen, the close bond between the domestic and the cultic is particularly suggestive. At the turn of the century almanacs printed in Bengal would have carried columns for the housewife to put in her monthly accounts.¹ The calendar image would be perhaps of Kali striding on Shiva, the male God, prone and flaccid under the strident, erotically charged goddess. In this inversion of roles, the female assumes dark form, while Shiva can meld into space. The apparent innocence and potential of potent cultic images, and the space of the domestic give Mithu Sen a huge license.

The title of the exhibition suggests that she is opening up the intimate gaze to her immediate environment. Those objects on which her glance may fall seemingly casually, which she may even encounter on her travels. The small details of the everyday, like the still life or studies in drawing are animated, and then grow accretions that completely transform their original character. You are drawn in by the familiar and then startled and smacked by her charged, strange conjunctions. With extreme visual economy, the banal becomes predatory, deathly, or overly sexualized.

Mithu Sen's current exhibition mimics a salon hang, the kind of display which came to India during the colonial period. It was successfully used by Abanindranath Tagore's Calcutta exhibitions to emphasize the intimacy of viewing the miniature format. Sen puts in close conjunction the intense materiality of her world, now carrying the associations of here and there. Charms, trinkets, feathers bought off the streets in Delhi and Singapore become a part of her installation, the art

works in turn receive these *memento mori* like caresses or gifts, tokens of a bodily presence that deflects the sterility of the gallery space. In this way Sen sets up a triangulation of the gaze, between objects, art works and viewer – the domestic and the eccentric now temper the studio or gallery space. In their formation the art works then present several small narratives, the low buzz of women's conversations, a huddle of bodies, and a randy, inquisitive gaze. The glances of suggestions and desire are quickly snuffed out and rekindle elsewhere, later.

In the present exhibition, Sen moves between defining the materiality of her world to directing her gaze into the erotic male body. To play with the subject and the spectator's gaze she allows the image to hover between the ironic and the erotic that can delight as much as it teases the viewer's gaze.

The male phallic form – reduced, mocked, displaced, appears as domestic symbol or sculptural object. But nothing about this is straight or simple. The ordinary banana leaks, and drips with erotic

intent, shoes turn omnivorous, the toilet is sealed, forbidding usage. An angel that she photographed in a church in Dresden is now framed in velvet and flirts with tiger skin. The manual telephone and child's tricycle gain bones as accretion, insinuating the fear of sex and death.

In a central piece in the exhibition, the 'showpiece' the chandelier becomes completely intransigent, its florid expanse denying every principle of the decorative. In India's colonial history, chandeliers were imported for Indian palaces by Europeans like Claude Martin, and now in contemporary India, are the ornament of new citadels of capitalism. Sen splits the large chandelier, as in a diptych, and thereby renders it irretrievably severed. Its lamps appear chaotic, as receptacles of a skeletal foetus, a Mughal courtier fusing into India's endangered tiger, and the unmistakable carbon tones of fused light which mark the death of this object of beauty. Sen's forms drip and flow and bleed. Held by the white base of the paper they rest uneasily, ready to float or reappear in any other part.

"If it can come in my thought, it exists. In the material world either nothing exists or everything exists. It all happens in your mind".

In 2002-3 Mithu Sen created an exhibition titled **I Hate Pink**, inspired and driven by a childhood incident. Dark girls do not wear pink. Pink has spilled into the most contentious areas of her work – sexuality, eros and thanatos. Pink has the power to seduce, to explode, to attack. It permeates the grey zone between the sexes, of the gay and the transgendered. Death and desire, both symbolic of danger and power, become ironic and pop with a quick infusion of bubble gum pink. Pink lips, against a pink letterhead had formed part of her **Free Mithu** project, an online project inviting a "letter with love".

"Who does not feel in the flows of his desire both the lava and the water?" is a question posed by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*.² As a woman artist imaging and entering the domain of male desire, Sen draws from investigations into

psychology, but also biology and medicine. These are the real streams of the body, of desire, everyday function, even disease. But they are also the streams of the imagination that vitiate form, that sexualize, or render unstable.

By moving between the bodily and the domestic, Sen covers the gamut between corporeality/desire and sociality. That male bodies have generated power within the social is a given, particularly within a tradition bound society. Sen presents a very real possibility of dismemberment, severance and truncated male bodies. At the same time maleness or association with maleness spills into numerous seemingly unrelated forms. In the present exhibition the two poles, of association with the female menstruating body and the sexually exhausted male are presented in a somewhat skewed dialogue. Sen is comfortable in this partial gaze, it mimics the lens of the camera as she photographs her own environment, lifting seemingly innocuous details out of context and placing these together with fragmented images from her travels. The desiring gaze,

homosexual, heterosexual or female is never identified. What is seen then is an acute and suggestive nakedness, a vulnerability to unspecified intention.

Through the exhibition Sen's favoured arrangement is suggested by the diptych. Sen sees this as a duel / dual dialogue, as connection and severance, twinned and yet separate. In her way of work images drawn from different contexts are brought together and then installed as part theatre, part play. This aspect allows her to move between play and eroticism, girl and woman, street art buff and aesthete.

In a suite of works a painted male body lies prone, the head a painted (read smashed?) blur. The exhausted, splay-legged body bears interesting associations – from the ennui of Lucien Freud, to the abjectness of the body of the destroyed terrorist, familiar from scores of newspaper and television reports. Through such visualizing of the male Mithu Sen also recuperates power and agency. The act of looking down on two flaccid and faceless male bodies, feeds into the (dominating) gaze of the viewer.

Unlike feminist writer Luce Irigaray, who argues that the beauty of the female form must be inserted into dominant discourse, Sen does not bother about such an imaginative reconstruction. She produces maleness, isolating desire from the form, objectifying it and forcing a reaction to its biology. For several years now Sen has worked with the body *as part* forcing recognition of its inner and outer domains. Skeleton forms, lips, genitals, limbs and hands, appear with a strange gift of morphological authority as they grow other accretions and forms, or drip and ooze. In this sense Sen's forebears who have addressed marginalization and female imagery stretch from O'Keeffe and Judy Chicago to Marlene Dumas and Nalini Malani. But she marks how far women's art has progressed since, into the domains of control, an articulation of desire, and even a rejection of the (exhausted) male body.

Sen's imagery also relates to and transgresses her own roots. Santiniketan becomes the first site that engages the figure of the surrounding forest – in this case the dark bodied Santhal – as a

heroic, if somewhat distant, figure in the new nation. However images emerging from Santiniketan tend to be contained and normative. Sen has introduced a rupture of 'good taste' is engaging with the 'dark' body, in most cases, her own. In a series of autobiographical images, Sen has located herself in different kinds of visual regimes. The touristic body, the sexualized body that is also made visible, inside out, all bear the imprint of the face, Sen as grinning, carnal caricature, Sen as film noir subject. Even within domestic spaces, she does not seek to be defined as domesticated. Rather it is her work that carries the imprint of the body. She appears to insist – as Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro suggest in the essays 'Female Imagery'¹³ that just as all the assumptions aroused being female are to be questioned, then what about all the assumptions around being male? In Sen it is the male who may fear losing bodily substance, thus the male body cannot only mutate, grow accretions, morph and transform, it can also dissolve and exhaust itself before our eyes. Maleness becomes then unstable, even without reference to the female, a consequence

of its own auto-erotic psychosis. From her location in Delhi, South Asia, Sen is free to turn her gaze to the construction of the heroic male body of classical western art, dismember and deflate its assumed power and beauty.

Where in this unstable slew of images does she locate her own satisfaction? “I make stories for my living, for sustaining myself. I want to make my world and share it. There is no completeness without an imaginary world”.

Gayatri Sinha/Critical Collective is an art critic and curator based in New Delhi.

¹ *Woodcut Prints of the Nineteenth Century Calcutta*. Edited by Ashit Paul. Seagull Books Publication, 1983.

² *Anti-Oedipus, Deleuze and Guattari*, Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, Helen R. Lane. Original title *Capitalisme et schizophrénie: L'anti-Œdipe*. Published by Les Éditions de Minuit, 1977 (english)

³ p 40- 43 'Female Imagery' by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, Edited by Amelia Jones. Rutledge Publication, 2003

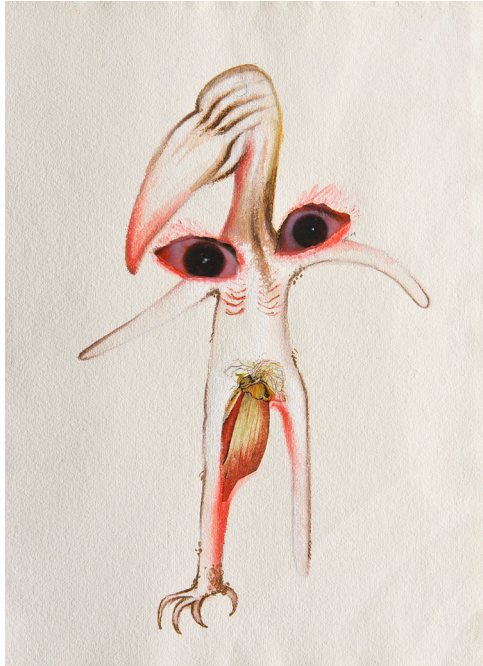


Family and friends mean nothing at all 2011 Fabric, ink on Epson archival (texture fine art) paper 12 x 17 inches

Zippers added and undone



2011 Fabric, ink on Epson archival (texture fine art) paper 12 x 17.5 inches



Without a name

2010 Watercolour, ink, fabric, gold foil drawing and collage on acid free Indian handmade paper 14.5 x 10.5 inches

A wrong move



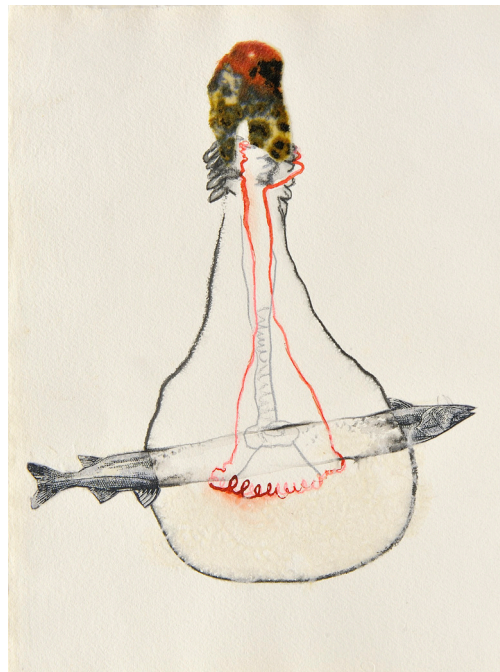
2010 Watercolour, ink, fabric, gold foil drawing and collage on acid free Indian handmade paper 14.5 x 11 inches



Gossip of my studio table 3

2010 Mixed media on Epson archival foto paper 12 x 17 inches

Fishy bulb



2010 Watercolour, ink, fabric, gold foil drawing and collage on acid free Indian handmade paper 14.5 x 11 inches



A light goes out

2011 Fabric, ink on Epson archival (texture fine art) paper 17 x 12 inches

Wounds to unbind pale flesh



2011 Fabric, ink on Epson archival (texture fine art) paper 12 x 17.5 inches



There is nothing

2010 Watercolour, ink, fabric, gold foil drawing and collage on acid free Indian handmade paper 14.5 x 11 inches



In house adoption 2011
Fabric, ink and swarovski stones on Epson archival
(texture fine art) paper 17 x 11.5 inches



Undo what has been done 2011
Watercolour, ink, fabric, gold foil drawing and collage
on acid free Indian handmade paper 10.5 x 15 inches



Bleeding out forever 2011
Watercolour, ink, fabric, gold foil drawing and collage
on acid free Indian handmade paper 40 x 27 inches



My foot 2007
Mixed media on Epson archival foto paper
17 x 12 inches

2011 Watercolour, ink, fabric, gold foil drawing and collage
on acid free Indian handmade paper 41 X 53.3 inches





Chandelier Sucks (diptych)



Only to be replaced by another 2011
Fabric, ink on Epson archival (texture fine art) paper
17 x 12 inches



Anti 2009
Mixed media on handmade paper
14 x 11 inches



Cold metal on cold metal

2006 Watercolour, ink, fabric, gold foil drawing and collage on acid free Indian handmade paper 14.5 x 11 inches

Gossip of my studio table 3



2010 Mixed media on Epson archival foto paper 17 x 12 inches



Inverted comma

2010 Mixed media on Epson archival foto paper 12 x 17 inches

Gossip of my studio table 1



2010 Mixed media on Epson archival foto paper 17 x 12 inches



Disposable sin

2011 Watercolour, ink, fabric, gold foil drawing and collage on acid free Indian handmade paper 11 x 14.5 inches

A pair of fangs



2010 Watercolour, ink, fabric, gold foil drawing and collage on acid free Indian handmade paper 11 x 14.5 inches



A thing unknown

2007 Mixed media on Epson archival foto paper 12 x 17 inches





Installation shots, In House Adoption, January 2012

Old fashioned ring tone



2011 Watercolour, ink, fabric, gold foil drawing and collage on acid free Indian handmade paper 40 x 27 inches

Mithu Sen

EDUCATION

- 2001 PG Programme (Visiting) Glasgow School of Art, Scotland
- 1997 MFA (Painting) Visva Bharati, Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan, West Bengal, India
- 1995 BFA (Painting) Visva Bharati, Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan, West Bengal, India

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2012 *In House Adoption*, Galerie Steph and Nature Morte, Singapore
- 2011 *In transit*, Espace Louis Vuitton, Taipei, Taiwan
- 2010 *Nothing Lost in Translation*, Nature Morte, Berlin
BLACK CANDY (iforgotmypenisathome), Chemould Gallery, Mumbai, School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU, New Delhi, Max Mueller Bhavan, New Delhi, 2011
- 2009 *Freemithu Khoj*, New Delhi
Dropping Gold Dropping Gold, Suzie Q Projects, Zurich
Me Tivo, Krinzinger Projekte, Vienna
- 2008 *I Dig, I Look Down*, Albion Gallery, London
-

- 2007 *Half Full, Part 1*, Bose Pacia Gallery, New York
Half Full, Part 2, Nature Morte, New Delhi
- 2006 *It's Good to be Queen*, Bose Pacia Artist Space, New York
Drawing Room, Nature Morte and British Council, New Delhi
Drawing Room, Chemould Gallery, Mumbai
- 2003 *I Hate Pink*, Lakeeren Art Gallery, Mumbai
- 2001 *Unbelongings*, Mackintosh Gallery, Glasgow, Scotland
- 2000 *Can we Really Look Beyond the Map?*, Art India Style, New Delhi

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *Spheres 4*, Galleria Continua, Le Moulin, Paris
Window in the Wall India and China: Imaginary Conversations, Pearl Lam Fine Art, Shanghai
Generation in transition, new art from India, Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw; CAC in Vilnius, Lithuania
Home Spun, Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi
Against All Odds, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi
For (e)play idea of fashion, Khoj, New Delhi
Myth-Reality, Guild Art Gallery, Mumbai
Of Gods and Goddesses, Cinema, Cricket: The New Cultural Icons of India, RPG (Jehangir Art Gallery), Mumbai
Meissen Art Campus, Leipzig, Germany
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- 2010 *Spiral Jetty*, Nature Morte, New Delhi
Public Enemy Number 1, Exhibit 320, New Delhi
Scratch, Sakshi Gallery at LKA, New Delhi
"I think therefore graffiti", The Guild, Mumbai
Eyes of India, Bartha and Senarclens Partners, Singapore
Writing Visuals, Harrington Street Art Center, Kolkata
Continuum Transfunctioner, Exhibit 320, New Delhi
Nature Revisited, Sanskriti Gallery, Kolkata
Size matter or does it?, Latitude 28, New Delhi
Evolve, Tao Art Gallery, Mumbai
At the Edge, Gallery Maya, London
- 2009 *Finding India*, COEX, Seoul
"What the body remembers, South Asian Video Art Today", London, UK
Abstract Cabinet, Eastside Project Space, Birmingham, UK
Indian Xianzai, Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Shanghai, China
Emotional Drawing, SOMA, Seoul, Korea
India Modern Exhibition, IVAM, Valencia, Spain
Art Against Terrorism, Akar Prakar, Kolkata
Other India Story, Lakeeren, Mumbai
The Human Animal, Arts I, New Delhi
The Body Vessel, Art Alive, New Delhi
Astonishment of Being, Birla Academy of Arts and Culture, Kolkata
-

- 2008 *Where in the word*, Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi
Mutant Beauty, Anant Art Centre, New Delhi
Synonymous, Guild Art Gallery, Mumbai
Still Moving Image, Devi Art Foundation, New Delhi
Emotional Drawing, MOMAT (Museum of Modern Art), Tokyo
Link, Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai
Contradictions and Complexities: Contemporary Art from India, D.E.N Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
Comme des bêtes, Lausanne Museum, Berne, Switzerland
Shifting Terrains/Altered Realities, The Art House, Singapore
A-MAZ-ING, Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai
- 2007 *Horn Please*, Kunst Museum, Berne, Switzerland
Incheon Korean Women Artist's Biennale, Seoul, Korea
Tiger by the Tail, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts
Here There Now, Gallery Soulflower, Bangkok
Making/Unmaking, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi
Private/Corporate 4, Daimler Chrysler Collection, Berlin
- 2006 *Being Anastasia*, Goethe Institut, Salvador, Brazil
Inside Outside, Nature Morte, New Delhi
All that glitters melt into air, IPF, London
Avatars of the Object, Guild Art Gallery, Mumbai
Shadow Lines, Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi
-

- 2005 *Metrospective: Visual Representations of Metrosexuality*, Kitab Mahal, Mumbai
Golden Jubilee Show, Rabindra Bhawan, Lalit Kala Akademie, New Delhi
Monsoon Show, Nature Morte, New Delhi
The New Wave in Bengal Art, Akar Prakar, Kolkata
Are We Like This Only? Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi
- 2004 *Tableaux Vivant*, Nature Morte at Shridharani Gallery, New Delhi
The Found Project, Latrobe Regional Gallery, Victoria, Australia
Fair and Furious-2, Jebiwool Art Museum, South Korea
The Art Connection, British Council and Birla Academy, Kolkata
Kaleidoscope, Square One Gallery, New York
Summer Show, Nature Morte, New Delhi
Fleshed Out and Lifting Off, Anant Gallery, New Delhi
The Making of India, Sahamat, New Delhi
- 2003 *Portrait of the Decades*, CIMA, Kolkata
Flag For Peace, Karachi, Pakistan
Peep Show, Apparao Gallery, Chennai
Through Customs, Bose Pacia Gallery, New York
Fair and Furious, Visual Art Gallery, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi
Sheesa, Sanskriti Foundation, New Delhi
A/P Artists Proof, Kala Ghoda Festival, Chemould Gallery, Mumbai
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2002 *Trans-Figuration*, Visual Art Gallery, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi
Borderless Terrain, Visual Art Gallery, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi
Young Contemporaries from Shantiniketan, Gallery Espace, New Delhi
The Closet/Closets, Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, New Delhi

AWARDS AND RESIDENCIES

Winner of the Skoda award on Indian contemporary art 2010
Britto International Artist Workshop, Dhaka 2010
Awagami/ MOMAT Residency, Tokyo, Japan 2008
YFLO (FICCI) Young Achievers Award 2008
UNESCO-Aschberg Bursaries for Brazil (Sacatar Foundation) 2005/2006
Bose Pacia Artist in Residence, New York 2006
Lijiang Studio Residency, Yunnan, China 2005
Wasani International Artist Workshop, Kenya 2004
Art Omi International Artist Residency, New York 2004
Khoj International Artist Residency, New Delhi 2003
Charles Wallace India Trust, UK 2000
Junior Fellowship, Government of India 2000

1971 Born in West Bengal, India
Mithu lives and works in New Delhi

DOEL, SPARROW

by Mithu Sen

*In my home's many rooms – sparrows, doels nest.
I weep on their wings – they too weep embracing me.
Eye's lashes embrace tears – tear's lashes embrace eyes.
In my home's many rooms – sparrows, doels nest.*

*If sadness is bird's wings – if sadness is wind's flight,
real sadness is mourning. Is real sadness dying?
That death is ice-still eyes – eyes' tears enclosing ash.
In my heart-chamber's many rooms – sparrows, doels nest.*

TRANSLATED BY SUDIP SEN

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