

Adjunct City: A Poetry Collection with a Critical Commentary

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the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work completed while pursuing my degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

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Abstract

The thesis combines a poetry collection called *Adjunct City* with a critical commentary titled “The Poetics of Being Beside.” “Being Beside” names the poems’ way of staying near the city while recognising the limits of what can be fully seen, known, or held. The collection approaches urban life through fragments, where the household and the street come into contact without forming a complete or fixed image of the city. The poems work through brief scenes and passing encounters. Their form follows the scale of attention, staying with a moment only as long as its image or sound can hold. Labour appears as a condition of everyday continuance, while objects carry the marks of use. Language moves between domestic speech, street sound, literary echo, and multilingual expression. The critical commentary examines these formal and thematic choices through close readings of selected poems. It considers how *Adjunct City* develops a poetics of nearness, restraint, and attention, where the city is encountered through partial moments and the marks everyday life leaves behind.

Dedication

To Afsan Chowdhury,

an adjunct professor, but my full-time old pal. We think there is nothing like “Prufrock” and
Roberta Flack when she sings:

Killing me softly with his song, telling my whole life with his words, killing me softly...

Acknowledgement

Life does not wait for literary dignity, yet literature has bent me into a more bearable self.

“It’s all I have to bring today—
This, and my heart beside—
This, and my heart.”

—Emily Dickinson

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PART I

Adjunct City

Poems

Dear Passerby,

You have seen more than this...

Song

War is household, my friend.
Come see my mother,
how gently she tucks her hair while
burning her hand,
you thought I'd say "on stove"?
how stupid, no not at all,
War is her midday done on a roof autumn
singing song you thought you'd never
heard her sing before.

Bell

Ice-cream'ola goes ringing his bell.
With plastic, scraps,
tin, torn sandal, two penny,
and two-storeyed young girl's pair of eyes,
go running,
a small band of boys.

Tax

After the new regulations, laughter is taxed.
People save it for birthdays, reunions, funerals
where it escapes by accident.
I keep a little in reserve,
like emergency cash.

Who

But what has happened to the morning,
Who hushed all my neighbours to sleep
when the splendid autumn has slipped
through the cracks of my town,

and whose skirt flouncing the air
hesitates at the light of my door
Please don't ask for more.

Thief

When Night slips beneath the door
Moon falls on the floor.

Post Clock

The clocks are recalibrated
to measure attention instead of hours.

Meetings last as long as
anyone is listening.

Some end immediately.

Mingle

Flesh and fish. Bargains and bone.

The blood of the morning seeps into sandals.

Heat

The mug holds more heat than the hand can carry.

Rickshaw bells lace the air like bangles

clinking in a drawer.

Steam lifts from the kitchen and curls towards the ceiling
and disappears.

Some argue about change.

Dogs bark into a hush they don't know they are breaking.

The curtain breathes in the wind,

in the movement, the thought arrives again.

History

How she wiped our mouths, as if
anything could be cleaned
without also vanishing.

Shine

Silver scraped clean until our face returns in reflection.

Not Today

The mop leaned like it knew better than to fall.

Fold

I know how the fold in your cloth
survives the day,
so let me press my palm there
and see how time holds shape
for a while.

Crease

Looking on the crease
beneath your brass chin I thought
you thought of it too;
there the fleurs du mal
stories beyond those square boxes
framed lit and dark,
and who has left the boat
and become the river
It is better not to know.

Slow City

The rooftop catches whispers
when the city blinks slower past midnight.

Local News

Go lean on window grille,
watch 'em fight for banana peel.

Ceiling Ghosts

These ghosts hang upside down
from the ceiling of our rooms.
They question this and that.
You must not answer.
They count the shadow a body casts,
They tally the length of night like ledgered debts,
They slip through cracks in the roof,
Dangle low, extend their hands, stroke your hair,
Like someone nearby drenched in rain
When there is no rain.

“On which monsoon afternoon three years ago
Did you raise your hand to clutch the bus shutter?
Why didn’t you smile that day
When autumn light fell on the roof?
That person you never retrieved,
Where do you discard their existence?”

Sparrow

Step Step.

Light-Horn-Step.

Scarf

drags.

Heels

hit.

Shutters

shut.

Cardboard-Sirens-Dark glass.

Step-Step.

Lamp-Face-Look.

Too-long-Lock.

Step Step.

Narrow breath.

Empty lane.

Pebbles know.

Walk

Don't

run

Yours.

Still.

Take

in pieces.

Seat Achhe!

The bus lurches, groans.
Back pressed to a stranger. Elbow jammed into metal.
Air thick with onion breath and yesterdays,
crammed into one motion.
The city blurs through cracked billboards and tomorrows.
A girl jumps rope in an alley. Hovering.
For a second, lungs expand too much.
Can't stay. Can't leave.
Fingers press into the iron bar. Pretend it's freedom.

Gatsbybye

Tracks shimmer when the train's gone.

Air still carries its ghost.

Feet on stone and hum in chest,

Not a shirt on my back, not a penny to my name¹

Someone's shirt caught on a nail,

torn fabric fluttering a flag.

The city blares behind,

Ahead, nothing but metal and sun.

¹ Hedy West, "500 Miles," 1963.

Temperature

In the café, I watch steam rise from
other people's cups and think about
how much of a conversation is temperature.
You once said my voice sounded
warmer at the end of the day.
I took that home and reheated it.

The Scream

Lights on water.

Water on face.

The silence between two footfalls louder than traffic.

Done

These midnights when all work is done
and boredom lifts you to the window
to the rain through coconut leaves
revealed in flashes of thunder,
and in that flicker,
life too at work to be whole,
one silent night.

Music

Window cracked enough to steal a breeze.

Two quarrel two floors down. Für Elise.

The voice doesn't carry,

because there's no voice

but music.

A cup steams untouched.

The laundry sways like it knows.

Before Sleep

I'll call you just before sleep.
We'll say nothing important and deep.
You'll tell me about a crack in the ceiling.
I'll describe a streetlight that has a feeling.
Then "O I'm yours O you're mine."
Our breathing so ordinary will align.
How cringe, and O how fine.
Now open the fridge and bring me wine.

Agreement

In public places, eye contact is considered
a form of agreement.

Contracts are shorter.

Betrayals are rarer, but sharper.

When you look at me through the screen,

I feel briefly bound to a future

I haven't signed.

I don't look away.

Half-Open

Do you think windows are open,
half open,
Can we turn off the distant lights
and stretch my arms into the lucid
darkness
and tell you who you are
to tell you I am shameless?

Muted

Phone screen on a brick ledge. Pirated film. No dialogue.

Only music.

The city sprawls behind, indifferent.

Lips mouth along to a song not in this language.

The wind tugs at sleeves like it wants to dance.

Could fall in love here, with no witness, no promise,
no name.

Moth

Window opposite glows all night.

Someone types fast.

Or fights. Or makes tea for no one.

A moth lands on the pane.

Stays longer than expected.

Wrong Dance

Here all have learned
to lie down but you.

So dance, softly, wrongly,
between evening and night,
with one light burning in one window,
with faces turning
away.

Black Night

Such a black night has taken the streets
in a winter that shakes an old woman in linens
thinning into the final garment.

Between

How the stars steal the sill tonight
and slide across your neck
when your hands nocturnal lean out
to reach mine with this poem pressed
between the tips of our tombs.

Stray

Tonight the night turns in steering wheel;
The burning hand hangs out the window
and so it goes in lorry
of stray corpses, marching down the deserted highway,
headlights towards a distant bank of cremation.

Hunger

The silence after the train leaves is a kind of hunger.

Someone somewhere left running.

Fabric

Some days I catch the border
of her dress
gliding past my sight,
and some days
the fabric seems still.

Eye Crust

Very often her disfigured face would return
in the hush of midnight
when all of it lay awake in the naked hours of sleep,
or in our swallowed dreams,
'What would you do without me?'

Even in the delicate mist of dreams
I murmur,
'Where are you at all?'

Only this would vapourise into her breath,
'Go wash your eyes!'

Distant

Moonlight slides down the laundry line and touches the clothes.

Who sits on a plastic stool, elbows on knees,

watches the building opposite blink?

Windows are confessions.

None yours.

Come Again

Yellow light through a dirty bulb.

Lips stained with paan, or waiting.

The corner shop closed early.

Someone still sits outside.

Tomorrow the shutter will rise again.

Rickshaw or Walk?

List, list, O list! If thou didst ever thy dear father love, then run, now, to the corner store and return with eggs before Maghrib. Azan ripples through the buildings like wind over the pond, the sky's hue tilts from blistering brass to blue ash. Rickshaw or walk. The city demands answers to questions that do not matter. We could walk. Float. The street itself is a river made of movement, the currents of people and fumes and half-formed songs carrying us forward. Let us go while it does not sleep but turns. Its lungs are made of dust and engines. Mornings break with rickshaw clatter and the wail of a baby somewhere above the sixth floor. A boy sells phone chargers from a plastic sheet. A girl in a dusty school uniform chews sugarcane. Kapor shukayni! The laundry again, threatened by rain or crows or both. In the midst of it all, let us go. Through puddles and shouting and life. What to a flâneur is a daffodil? To me, you stringing wet clothes with grace that would shame sculpture, face turned to the breeze. Grandma's silhouette in a green-tinted kitchen, stirring lentils with fingers soft as grief. A rooftop cricket game interrupted by Shiuli petals falling like bored stars. Tagore whispering from a lit-up screen in an autorickshaw, next to an old man holding two children as if playing nanny. The street speaks in textures. Overripe jackfruit. Spilt diesel. The metallic edge of heat. Tea-stained mornings melt into tyre-smudged evenings. A girl with a cracked phone screen stares at nothing at all. A man in a tie, face like wet paper, stands at the kerb muttering "madarchod!" and disappears into the smog. Remember the boy who lives where our maps grow vague? Far across apartments with their security guards and lights that flicker back to life when the load-shedding ends, far across the gated dreams of concrete and insurance, behind the wall painted with mango juice ads, under tin roofs like old armour. Smoky breath rising from fires built of broken furniture and old exam scripts. No older than fifteen? The uneven chappals carry newspapers stairwell to stairwell, the weight of headlines and mother's medicine. A brother, a courier, a boy, shoulders broad as the city lanes. He is found as the sky goes from tangerine to an exhausted grey, in the corner of the field behind our large apartments, curled into himself like the dog, the newspaper unopened in his lap. Plays his flute. A kind of weeping, I think to myself. No performance. No words. Tears that belong not to us, to sorrow neither, but to living too much and too young. Tears the kind that soak into soil unnoticed, with songs buried beneath the ground like rotted leaves, to spring as cucumbers. Life! Ridiculous and green and full of aches. How have you written of such boys, buses with bones, girls whose dreams rattle inside lunchboxes? Pukarta chala hoon main gali gali bahar ki, alleys do not echo back. They just carry on. I remember her.

O keno tokhon uriye aanchol khola chule baire elo... Always wind, always motion, as if the city could never keep her still. Let us go, past lives behind glass, women beating pillows on balconies like old drums, children learning verses under dim bulbs, a man on the roof talking to a star he mistakes for a drone. That house, its red grill and peeling paint, is more beautiful than you. A house that breathes, like this city. With its gasps and its laughter, its unbearable tenderness. I hear the boy's distant flute. O Piper from Hamelin, here all are humans but me, take your rat.

Rip Repair Uncle

Where have the cobblers gone?
I walked miles now
with this torn thing.
Have slippers become so cheap?
Only then did I notice,
The whole bazaar was barefoot!

Funny, I thought,
Well, until someone tugged at my back,
“Istighfar, son!
What’s that thing on your foot?”

Barefoot

It starts without warning.

Torrents soak the street,
flooding ankles and intentions.

A boy dances barefoot in the muddy water.

You watch from under shelter.

Then step out.

Jwor Hobe

Let me wipe your face
before breeze gets there first.

Seam

Cloth mended at the seam again,
thread almost the right colour.

Towel

Look how the orange towel sways on the verge of falling,
This about autumn lingers all year long.

The Show

Tea left on stove until bitter.

Nails clipped too close.

Shadow lingers longer than footsteps.

You turn on the light.

Tiffin

Children, Parents, Teachers,

Beer time is near!

Now imagine breaking fast with a cold one,

In the name of the merciful.

Just the Day

The night smells of wet cement and monsoon.

A breath, a theft.

The lane curves like it's hiding something,
not danger.

Just the day.

Softening

Streetlight blinks like Hamlet.

Feet hush against pavement washed of heat.

Some nights the world softens its edges

out of kind exhaustion.

Tear

Chiffon scarf caught in a closing gate.

Tugged loose too late.

A tear at the edge, small and certain.

Wounds best worn softly.

The Picture

Behind every door, a version of staying.

No one opens.

Chehlum

Now you lie,
who has fed the dogs and put them to rest,
in the corners of these stranger alleys,
like some tattered apparitions,
struck by rain,
in the chehlum of mortals.

Off-Key

The corridor smells of antiseptic and waiting.

A mother sings off-key.

A child counts tiles on the floor.

One two three four five seven eight nine.

Hope here is quiet

in drips and discharge sheets.

Trip

How do you think of the sea,
you who touched it once in a broken bottle

Stolen

Only this I entrust you with
is mine,
the way once in my childhood
in the month of Ashar,
I stole a mango and ran home
through the windy rice field,

this too, stolen, ripening still.

Miss Concrete

She walks in beauty,
She walks in concrete.
Walk there as you are
on this rusty pavement
that slowly scrapes your tender skin
and sleeves it with damage and dust.
I bear this uncaring world you choose
every day with glorious care.

Almost Home

Wherever you place your hand,
there my body begins.

Like a child, I re-learn
the weight of standing still.

With the burden of sight

I go home

or do not go at all.

Impossible

If I have you, my imaginary friends will say, "You've won."

Shakespeare will nod from upstairs

The afternoon will quarrel quietly with the window then,

the curtain will bow

the smell of ginger and milk will rise

and I'll think, you are impossible.

Ink

Night slips in like ink
through a crack in chipped tile.
A glass left half full.
The body learning stillness
after too many names
spoken without permission.

Squeal

When the tap is closed harder than necessary,
the water squeals.

Wave

Concrete roof. Clothesline.

A child flies a kite from two buildings away.

She waves.

He doesn't see.

She waves again.

Goodnight

Go to what is yours.

The streets no longer want you,
the windows have closed their eyes.

Do not look,
they are finished with your face.

The night is going tonight
and you have loved what knows
how to return,
so let it go,
you watchman with your dogs
and going hurricane,
leave the thieves tonight
to what is not yours.

PART II

Adjunct City: The Poetics of Being Beside

Critical Commentary

Adjunct City: The Poetics of Being Beside

I. Being Beside

Adjunct City begins from a position of nearness without fully belonging. “Adjunct” suggests something attached to a structure, necessary to its continuance, yet kept away from its centre. It is close enough to hear, clean, carry, notice, and sustain, but not fully admitted into the order it helps hold together. Placed beside “city,” the term turns urban space into a field of passing relations between people, objects, sounds, labour, and gestures. “Being Beside” emerges from this position of partial attachment. The city that appears here is made through brief encounters, handled objects, unfinished gestures, and forms of work left at the edge of notice.

This logic runs throughout the collection’s off-centre encounters. The city is approached through moments that appear briefly, shift, and pass away. The epigraph, “Dear passerby, / You have seen more than this...,” addresses a figure already in motion, with the ellipsis sustaining that movement as open and incomplete. The passerby becomes a moving point of encounter between the speaker and the world, shifting among witness, stranger, citizen, and reader. What has been seen exceeds possession; it can only be held briefly, with the knowledge that another has already seen beyond the poem’s frame. The collection’s perception arrives after the fact, among familiar spaces where seeing is belated, fragmentary, and shared.

The same condition shapes the lyric subject of *Adjunct City*. The poems seldom depend on a stable “I” standing at the centre of experience. Subjectivity emerges through touch, sound, cloth, bodily fatigue, and cracked reflection. The self takes shape within the city’s material and sensory textures, where feeling passes through things before becoming expression. The poems’ opening movement makes it immediate:

War is household, my friend.
 Come see my mother,
 how gently she tucks her hair while
 burning her hand,
 you thought I'd say "on stove"?
 how stupid, no not at all,
 War is her midday done on a roof autumn
 singing song you thought you'd never
 heard her sing before.
 ("Song" 1-9)

The statement, "War is household, my friend," enters abruptly. Its lack of setup suggests that the condition it names is already active in daily life before being spoken aloud. The household, usually imagined as a site of familiarity, habit, care, and enclosure, receives the language of war. The mother's domestic gesture of tucking her hair while burning her hand keeps the injury within the motion of the scene. War becomes the mundane: the midday, the roof, the hand, autumn, and a song one thought one had never heard her sing before.

The repetition of household work places the song within a rhythm of continuance. One task passes into another, and the following day carries many of the same demands. The sequence recalls the condition of Sisyphus in Albert Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus," condemned to push the stone uphill and begin again after its descent. The essay closes with the lines, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (123). The comparison is one of rhythm rather than equivalence. Camus's formulation directs

attention towards repetition sustained from within rather than towards a reward waiting at its end. In “Song,” the mother’s singing occupies such an interval. It accompanies her work, forming an interior rhythm through which one gesture can follow another. The labour retains its difficulty, while the song gives the day a small, sustaining movement of its own. Household nearness emerges through this quiet accompaniment.

The city here is something already seen, already happening, and already surpassing the frame. The poems move by attending to the small points where urban life becomes perceptible at the edge of access. Doors, windows, railings, rooftops, and mirrors recur throughout the manuscript as points of entry and limit. They shape what the poem can approach, and what it must leave untouched. This threshold appears in “Distant”:

Moonlight slides down the laundry line and touches the clothes.

Who sits on a plastic stool, elbows on knees,
watches the building opposite blink.

Windows are confessions.

None yours.

(“Distant” 1-5)

To see something is already to enter into relation with it. That relation goes only so far: “Windows are confessions. / None yours.” Other lives are visible, lit, framed, and near enough to imagine, yet they remain separate. The collection often turns towards lives and moments glimpsed in passing, holding them through brief gestures rather than complete stories. “Behind every door, a version of staying. / No one opens” (“The Picture” 1-2) keeps the unseen life present though unavailable.

Marcel Proust's narrator in *Time Regained* locates style in the quality of perception itself, writing that for the author, style is "not of technique but of vision" (299). Art permits a movement beyond the enclosure of individual perception. "Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves" and "know what another person sees" (299). The windows in "Distant" place attention at a threshold, reaching towards another life while remaining conscious of its partial position. The lit frame creates a relation while preserving the separateness of the life behind it. Across *Adjunct City*, style takes shape through this situated nearness. A sound, object, gesture, or passing figure becomes briefly perceptible, while the wider life beyond the frame continues in its own way.

II. Fragments in Measure

A fragment in *Adjunct City* lasts only as long as a sound, touch, interruption, or passing thought can hold its force. “When Night slips beneath the door / Moon falls on the floor” (“Thief” 1-2) stays at the scale of a small breach between outside and inside. Night enters under the door, moonlight falls across the floor. The event is slight and unceremonious. Nothing is expanded beyond the moment’s own duration. The image ends where the observation ends, before explanation overtakes the shadow.

In “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” Ezra Pound defines the Image as a concentrated act of perception: “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (Pound 200). The instant is not a shortened account of an event. It is the form in which perception becomes available. Pound’s “Fan-piece, for her Imperial Lord” places an ordinary object within such a concentrated field:

Fan of white silk,
 clear as frost on the grass-blade,
 You also are laid aside.
 (Pound, “Fan-piece” 52)

The fan remains tactile and precise, while “laid aside” allows an emotional history to enter through the object without unfolding into narrative. The relation to “Thief” lies in scale rather than subject. Night, door, moon, and floor are brought into contact, and the fragment ends once that contact is complete.

Edgar Allan Poe approaches this restraint at a different scale. While Pound concentrates perception within the Image, Poe considers the compositional discipline by which an effect is arranged and sustained. Poe’s account of composition as deliberate arrangement rather than “fine

frenzy” (Poe 461) extends the discussion from the instant to the sequence. Effect, Poe suggests, depends on selection, proportion, duration, and order, with the work moving “step by step” rather than by accident (461). His own “The City in the Sea” gives that measured assembly a darker scale:

Lo! Death has reared himself a throne
 In a strange city lying alone
 Far down within the dim West,
 Where the good and the bad and the worst and the best
 Have gone to their eternal rest.
 There shrines and palaces and towers
 Resemble nothing that is ours.
 Resignedly beneath the sky
 The melancholy waters lie.
 (Poe, “The City in the Sea” 1-9)

The poem moves through distinct parts while preserving a single atmosphere. A long poem, in Poe’s words, is “a succession of brief ones, of brief poetical effects” that build a shared “unity of impression” (462). *Adjunct City* adapts the condition into its own scale. The poems, rather than seeking a single, totalising emotional unity, work through local concentrations. Each fragment holds one effect until its necessary duration is reached, then stops before the effect loosens.

“Post Clock” brings this exactness into the measurement of urban time:

The clocks are recalibrated
to measure attention instead of hours.

Meetings last as long as
anyone is listening.

Some end immediately.

(“Post Clock” 1-5)

Attention replaces mechanical time as the real unit of value. The brevity sharpens the joke: once listening ends, so does duration. “Some end immediately” cuts off with the same impatience it describes, turning time into a measure of engagement rather than hours.

“Mingle” shifts into the market’s compressed materials: “Flesh and fish. Bargains and bone. / The blood of the morning seeps into sandals” (“Mingle” 1-2). The market appears through things that touch, stain, and contaminate one another. Flesh, fish, bargain, bone, blood, morning, and sandals sit beside one another in a flat sequence. The final image of blood seeping into sandals brings the scene to the level of bodily passage. The market is stepped through, marking the body at the foot. Once the blood reaches the sandal, the fragment has already crossed into contact.

“Tax” places laughter inside civic regulation:

After the new regulations, laughter is taxed.

People save it for birthdays, reunions, funerals
where it escapes by accident.

I keep a little in reserve,
like emergency cash.

(“Tax” 1-5)

Emotion becomes a rationed utility. Laughter is budgeted, saved, and spent like emergency cash, folded into the transactional habits of an over-regulated city.

This rationed emotion takes a sensory form in “The Scream,” whose title recalls Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893. National Museum, Oslo. The National Museum, www.nasjonalmuseet.no.

While Munch’s *The Scream* externalises distress into a distorted landscape, *Adjunct City*’s “The Scream” internalises it. The poem records no audible cry; instead, tension is located in the surrounding environment: “Lights on water. / Water on face. / The silence between two footfalls louder than traffic” (“The Scream” 1-3). The expected noise is displaced into the heavy, continuous interval between movements, allowing silence to carry the weight of an unvoiced feeling.

When Poe argues that “the object of Truth” is more properly pursued through prose, he suggests that poetry need not depend on direct statement as its primary mode (Poe 461). In *Adjunct City*, meaning often gathers through arrangement, gesture, and contact. Night slips under the door without fear being named, blood seeps into sandals without a social explanation being supplied, and silence carries the force of a missing cry. Explanation would narrow these images too quickly, fixing them into meanings they have not yet become.

“Done” carries this indirect expression into late-night exhaustion:

These midnights when all work is done
 and boredom lifts you to the window
 to the rain through coconut leaves
 revealed in flashes of thunder,
 and in that flicker,
 life too at work to be whole,
 one silent night.

(“Done” 1-7)

The speaker moves from the demands of work to an idle observation of rain through coconut leaves, revealed only in flashes. The phrase “life too at work to be whole” keeps exhaustion from settling into rest. Even after labour ends, life remains unfinished. The closing phrase, “one silent night,” gathers that fatigue into stillness, matching the quiet of a room after the working day has ended.

A similar quietness further settles into the city’s night air:

The night smells of wet cement and monsoon.
 A breath, a theft.

The lane curves like it's hiding something,
not danger.

Just the day.

("Just the Day" 1-5)

A slight atmospheric tension gathers through smell, weather, breath, theft, and the curving lane. The turn from "not danger" to "Just the day" does not remove unease so much as return it to the ordinary. Nothing exceptional has to happen, the day itself carries enough dampness and suspicion.

Scale throughout the fragments stays close to the object or moment at hand. A clock, a sandal, a window, a lane, a scream, and a midnight room remain only as long as their effects can hold. Blood stays at the foot, silence between steps, laughter saved like cash, the day carrying its own theft.

III. The City as Gesture

In *Adjunct City*, the city is first encountered through the body. Heat exceeds the hand, bells turn the ear, rain alters movement, crowded transport compresses breath, and shutters set the rhythm of waiting. Urban life is felt as a series of bodily adjustments, what can be carried, where the body pauses, when it moves, what it avoids and releases. The lines respond to these conditions, shortening, breaking, pausing, or moving forward through contact with sound, weather, surface, and motion. This attention to the passing present recalls Charles Baudelaire's account of modern life, in which he gives artistic seriousness to what is temporary and immediate. Modernity is "the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent," through which the artist "extract[s] from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distill the eternal from the transitory" (Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" 17). "To a Passerby" communicates this as clearly as anywhere in *Les Fleurs du Mal*:

The street about me roared with a deafening sound.

Tall, slender, in heavy mourning, majestic grief,

A woman passed, with a glittering hand

Raising, swinging the hem and flounces of her skirt;

A lightning flash... then night! Fleeting beauty

By whose glance I was suddenly reborn,

Will I see you no more before eternity?

(Baudelaire, "To a Passerby" 1-7)

The crowd brings to the urban dweller a figure that strikes. The value of the present lies in her movement, circumstance, gesture, clothing, and posture. These are the habits of an age, the outward signs through which a historical moment becomes readable in how people dress, walk,

wait, look, travel, consume, and occupy public space. While *Adjunct City* shares this commitment to the immediate present, its version of the present is fractured across heat, transit, prayer calls, cheap commerce, and the worn surfaces of daily survival. Human subjects and inanimate objects begin to share the field of attention, moving the passerby away from the centre. The speaker's consciousness moves through a family of things with shared regard. The multisensory modernity is heard, felt, and endured.

It is read in "Heat":

The mug holds more heat than the hand can carry.

Rickshaw bells lace the air like bangles

clinking in a drawer.

Steam lifts from the kitchen and curls towards the ceiling and disappears.

Some argue about change.

Dogs bark into a hush they don't know they are breaking.

The curtain breathes in the wind,

in the movement, the thought arrives again.

("Heat" 1-9)

The simile "Rickshaw bells lace the air like bangles / clinking in a drawer" joins street sound to domestic ornament. The rickshaw bell is heard through the image of a bangle, an object worn on the body and kept inside the home. Public motion enters the domestic interior as something tactile and intimate. Steam lifts from the kitchen, dogs bark into a hush they do not know they are breaking, and the curtain breathes in the wind. Inside this circulation of heat, sound, animal noise, argument, and moving air, "the thought arrives again."

From this circulation, sound becomes one of the body's ways of knowing the city. It tells the body what is near, passing, and has entered from another floor, street, or life. In "Bell," the ice-cream seller's call gathers the city into motion:

Ice-cream'ola goes ringing his bell.
 With plastic, scraps,
 tin, torn sandal, two penny,
 and two-storeyed young girl's pair of eyes,
 go running,
 a small band of boys.
 ("Bell" 1-6)

The insertion of "two-storeyed young girl's pair of eyes" into a list of disposable materials "plastic, scraps, tin, torn sandal, two penny" flattens the value. Vision itself becomes one item among others, which moves in response to sound. The ice-cream seller's bell makes the body respond before thought can organise the scene.

A similar shift occurs in "Music":
 Window cracked enough to steal a breeze.
 Two quarrel two floors down. Für Elise.²
 The voice doesn't carry,
 because there's no voice
 but music.
 A cup steams untouched.
 The laundry sways like it knows.

² Ludwig van Beethoven, "Für Elise" (*Bagatelle No. 25 in A minor*, WoO 59), 1810.

(“Music” 1-7)

The quarrel and Beethoven’s “Für Elise” arrive together at the edge of the room, but the speaker’s attention settles on the music. The distinction resembles the interaction between bottom-up and top-down auditory attention. Salient sounds may draw perception through their acoustic force, while selective attention allows a listener to sustain focus on one sound within a competing auditory field (Elhilali et al. 1-2). A quarrel may invite an immediate, stimulus-driven response, yet “Für Elise” becomes the sound the speaker continues to receive. The voice “doesn’t carry” because attention does not follow the quarrel into the lives from which it comes. Music remains within the room alongside the untouched cup and swaying laundry. The scene turns selective listening into a form of restraint. Another life is near enough to be heard, while its details remain outside the speaker’s claim.

In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Walter Benjamin notes, “The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli” (159). Modern perception, in this account, forms through alertness rather than smooth continuity. In *Adjunct City*, signals, movement, exposure, and watchfulness break perception into smaller units. “Sparrow” gives this condition a bodily rhythm:

Step Step.

Light-Horn-Step.

Scarf

drags.

Heels

hit.

Shutters

shut.

Cardboard-Sirens-Dark glass.

Step-Step.

Lamp-Face-Look.

Too-long-Lock.

Step Step.

Narrow breath.

Empty lane.

Pebbles know.

Walk

Don't

run

Yours.

Still.

Take

in pieces.

("Sparrow" 1-23)

The title pulls human walking towards sparrow-like motion, quick, broken, watchful, made of brief advances and sudden checks. "Step-Step. / Light-Horn-Step" turns movement into a sequence of shocks, where light, horn, foot, scarf, shutter, siren, glass, face, and lock arrive as separate signals. The command "Walk / Don't / run" holds the body inside a controlled alarm, keeping movement at the edge of flight. The ending "Yours. / Still. / Take / in pieces" makes

public space enter the self as fragments of instruction, perception, and fear. The city is known in pieces because the body can only receive it that way.

This awareness continues in public transport:

The bus lurches, groans.

Back pressed to a stranger. Elbow jammed into metal.

Air thick with onion breath and yesterdays,
crammed into one motion.

The city blurs through cracked billboards and tomorrows.

A girl jumps rope in an alley. Hovering.

For a second, lungs expand too much.

Can't stay. Can't leave.

Fingers press into the iron bar. Pretend it's freedom.

("Seat Achhe!" 1-9)

Motion becomes compression. The body is carried and held at once, pressed between strangers, metal, breath, and the bus's single forward movement. The glimpse of the girl jumping rope briefly opens another rhythm, but the expansion cannot last, "Can't stay. Can't leave." The hand pressing into the iron bar turns grip into a small substitute for agency. The title, "Seat Achhe!," echoes the conductor's equivocal promise that there is room inside, yet a seat may exist while space itself remains withheld. Movement is uneasy, entry cramped, and closeness imposed. In this cramped space, the iron bar becomes a bitter version of freedom.

The compressed motion gives way to a slower scene of waiting in "Come Again":

Yellow light through a dirty bulb.

Lips stained with paan, or waiting.

The corner shop closed early.

Someone still sits outside.

Tomorrow the shutter will rise again.

("Come Again" 1-5)

Repetition belongs to daily life. The shutter's return promises routine, while the person outside remains suspended in the present interval. The phrase "paan, or waiting" makes bodily stain and waiting nearly indistinguishable, as if idleness itself has settled on the mouth. Yellow light, closed commerce, stained lips, and the promise of tomorrow give "waiting" a visible texture. It has a place, a light, a mouth, and a shutter that will rise again.

"Barefoot" changes the terms of movement:

It starts without warning.

Torrents soak the street,

flooding ankles and intentions.

A boy dances barefoot in the muddy water.

You watch from under shelter.

Then step out.

("Barefoot" 1-6)

"It starts without warning," and torrents soak the street, "flooding ankles and intentions." The phrase makes intention material, something rain can enter, disturb, and undo. A boy dances barefoot in muddy water, while the speaker watches from shelter before stepping out. The scene stays close to rain, mud, shelter, and bodily movement rather than turning the child's dance or the step into the street into a grand symbolic release. The weather remains the primary force, reorganising daily routine through immediate environmental conditions.

Across these poems, intention keeps meeting circumstance through heat, bells, buses, rain, music, and shutters. Background details become the means through which the body understands the city.

“Miss Concrete” brings that encounter to the surface of the pavement:

She walks in beauty,

She walks in concrete.

Walk there as you are

on this rusty pavement

that slowly scrapes your tender skin

and sleeves it with damage and dust.

I bear this uncaring world you choose

every day with glorious care.

(“Miss Concrete” 1-8)

The echo of Byron’s “She walks in beauty” alters how aesthetic grace is framed. One expects a body to walk “on” concrete, but “She walks in concrete” turns pavement into a condition, almost an atmosphere, that the body moves inside rather than merely across. Retaining the preposition shifts abstract beauty into material friction: rust, dust, scraping, and daily contact. Romantic appreciation becomes an act of everyday accompaniment, bearing the damage of the urban surface with care.

Jibanananda Das distinguishes poetic making from the reproduction of an already available reality. In “Kobitar Kotha,” he writes that “poetry and life are two different emanations of the same thing,” yet “a complete reconstruction of what we ordinarily understand as reality”

does not remain within poetry. Instead, “we have entered a new region” (Das 13; my trans.).³

This new region does not sever poetry from lived experience. Jibanananda later describes poetry as “a new use” of the world, one that retains “a complete relation with life, secretly nurtured through tunnels,” with all the “obscurity and newness” of that relation (14; my trans.).⁴ His own city poem “Ratri” moves through that relation when three rickshaws merge into the light of a gaslamp: “Three rickshaws rushed and vanished into the final gaslamp,/ as if by a magician’s spell” (Das, “Ratri” 7–8; my trans.).⁵ The rickshaws and gaslamp belong to the material city, but their contact alters the street without removing it from recognition.

The sensory details of *Adjunct City* enter similar shifts of relation. A rickshaw bell passes into the sound of bangles in a drawer, a quarrel from another floor reaches the room as “Für Elise,” and a blinking streetlight takes on Hamlet’s hesitation. The city remains near through its objects and sounds while imagination permits another order of perception to emerge from within it. Jibanananda’s image of a hidden, tunnel-nurtured relation returns to the collection’s poetics of being beside. Nearness does not require complete access. Life continues beyond the boundaries of any single image.

The city here is circumstantial, known through what the body must cross, hear, hold, and endure. It enters the hand, the lungs, the ear, the feet, and the poem.

³ “কবিতা ও জীবন একই জিনিসেরই দুই রকম উৎসারণ; [...] কিন্তু সাধারণত বাস্তব বলতে আমরা যা বুঝি তার সম্পূর্ণ পুনর্গঠন তবুও কাব্যের ভিতর থাকে না; আমরা এক নতুন প্রদেশে প্রবেশ করেছি।” (Das 13)

⁴ “এক নতুন ব্যবহারের কল্পনা করা যেতে পারে যা কাব্য;—অথচ জীবনের সঙ্গে যার গোপনীয় সুড়ঙ্গলালিত সম্পূর্ণ সম্বন্ধ; সম্বন্ধের ধূসরতা ও নূতনতা।” (Das 14)

⁵ “তিনটি রিক্শ ছুটে মিশে গেল শেষ গ্যাসল্যাম্পে
মায়াবীর মতো জাদুবলে।”

IV. What Labour Leaves

Labour throughout the collection moves through ordinary life until it becomes part of the day's texture. A task ends, but the object or room keeps its alteration. The hand withdraws, and the surface, cloth, water, or light carries the sign of what has passed through it. Daily life is read through these slight changes, where work has already entered things and stayed. "History" brings cleaning close to vanishing: "How she wiped our mouths, as if/ anything could be cleaned/ without also vanishing" ("History" 1-3). The act is domestic, familiar, almost too ordinary to notice. A mouth is wiped, and cleanliness arrives with disappearance. Care and erasure happen in the same motion. The wiped mouth becomes a small history of being looked after and being made presentable, of tenderness arriving through a gesture that also takes something away.

"Shine" brings this relation between cleaning and visibility into one line: "Silver scraped clean until our face returns in reflection" ("Shine" 1). Reflection arrives through scraping. The face returns because the surface has been worked over. The word "our" keeps the image from becoming private. The silver gives back a shared face, something domestic and collective. The shine carries the work that made it possible, though that work has already begun to disappear into the shining object.

This logic becomes more intimate in "Fold":

I know how the fold in your cloth
survives the day,
so let me press my palm there
and see how time holds shape
for a while.

("Fold" 1-5)

The fold has kept the shape of the day. The body has moved through hours, and the cloth has received their mark. The palm pressed there tries to feel how time has taken shape on the body's covering. Cloth remains cloth, yet the day has already left its shape in the fold. Where "Post Clock" imagines time through attention, "Fold" places it in a material surface. Time becomes something held by fabric, felt through the palm, visible only for a while. The fold may loosen, but for the moment it keeps the day's form. Time becomes tactile as a crease.

In "Seam," repair becomes central to continuance and survival: "Cloth mended at the seam again, / thread almost the right colour" ("Seam" 1-2). The word "again" places repair inside repetition. The mending is imperfect, and "almost the right colour" keeps damage and care together, since the attempt to restore the garment also preserves the history of its tear.

"The Show" brings the same attention into a room:

Tea left on stove until bitter.

Nails clipped too close.

Shadow lingers longer than footsteps.

You turn on the light.

("The Show" 1-4)

The scene arrives after the main event. Tea has stayed too long on the stove. Nails have been clipped too close. A shadow remains after footsteps have gone. The light comes on at the end, and the room becomes visible in its after-state. The title "The Show" suggests display, but the room offers small signs rather than a full account. Bitter tea, clipped nails, shadow, light. The household holds the event through ordinary things. Their arrangement makes the scene felt while the event itself stays unnamed.

“Squeal” transforms this after-effect into a sound: “When the tap is closed harder than necessary, / the water squeals” (“Squeal” 1-2). The action is ordinary until “harder than necessary” changes its weight. The hand closes the tap with more force than the task requires, and the water answers. The sound carries what the line does not name. A small domestic object receives the excess of the gesture and gives it back as a squeal. The feeling remains inside the action. It passes through hand, tap, and water before it can become a direct statement.

“Off-Key” carries this into a corridor of waiting:

The corridor smells of antiseptic and waiting.

A mother sings off-key.

A child counts tiles on the floor.

One two three four five seven eight nine.

Hope here is quiet

in drips and discharge sheets.

(“Off-Key” 1-6)

Hope takes material form in the corridor’s vocabulary: drips, sheets, tiles, antiseptic. The child’s counting misses six, and the skipped number gives the scene a slight break in order. The mother sings off-key, a song that may fail musically and still be the act by which someone remains near.

Across *Adjunct City*, labour stays after the hand has moved away. It enters the day quietly, until work and ordinary life begin to share the same texture. Things do not return untouched from use. A surface, a room, or a body keeps the sign of what has passed through it. Labour leaves the traces by which life keeps going.

V. Tongues in Passing

The collection's language arrives from both the household and the street. It comes through overheard speech, prayer, song, insult, classroom rhythm, domestic idiom, literary echo, and mispronunciation, often carrying more than English alone can settle. English becomes adjunct here, one tongue among others, attached to the sounds, histories, and habits it must carry through the city. Meaning often arrives in passing, mouthed, overheard, half-understood, sung, remembered, or withheld. "Muted" begins inside that condition:

Phone screen on a brick ledge. Pirated film. No dialogue.

Only music.

The city sprawls behind, indifferent.

Lips mouth along to a song not in this language.

The wind tugs at sleeves like it wants to dance.

Could fall in love here, with no witness, no promise,

no name.

("Muted" 1-7)

The song, though left untranslated, is felt and followed. Intimacy forms through rhythm, mouth, wind, sleeve, screen, and nearness before language becomes fully available. "Could fall in love here, with no witness, no promise, / no name" belongs to this atmosphere of unclaimed closeness. Love appears before official terms arrive, held in music, gesture, and bodily proximity rather than witness, promise, or name.

"Tiffin" turns this mingling into tonal collision:

Children, Parents, Teachers,

Beer time is near!

Now imagine breaking fast with a cold one,
In the name of the merciful.

("Tiffin" 1-4)

School notice, alcohol, fasting, religious invocation, and comic irreverence are pressed into one compressed utterance. The opening address, "Children, Parents, Teachers," begins in the language of institutional announcement, but "Beer time is near!" immediately breaks that frame. "Breaking fast with a cold one" pushes religious practice into a casual, almost absurd appetite, while "In the name of the merciful" keeps the devotional echo present inside the joke. The result is unstable and playful, with sacred, social, and comic registers sharing the same breath without settling into a single tone.

T. S. Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" understands "tradition" as an active force rather than a decorative reference. Tradition is not simply received but obtained through labour, through a "historical sense" which "involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (Eliot 37). The new work also alters the order through which the past is understood. *Adjunct City* enters this conversation through Shakespeare, Hamlet, Beethoven, lyric address, romantic cliché, song, prayer, and local speech. They enter as living materials, brought into daily speech rather than kept at a ceremonial distance.

"Softening" introduces a playful, weary encounter with literary inheritance:

Streetlight blinks like Hamlet.
Feet hush against pavement washed of heat.
Some nights the world softens its edges
out of kind exhaustion.

("Softening" 1-4)

“Streetlight blinks like Hamlet. / Feet hush against pavement washed of heat.” Prince Hamlet appears through a faulty local streetlight. The existential hesitation, “to be, or not to be” (*Hamlet* 3.1.56) is momentarily placed into an urban malfunction, to blink or not to blink, a light struggling to decide whether to stay lit or fail. Literary figures enter as gentle, almost comic echoes within the exhaustion of the daily commute.

“Impossible” places Shakespeare even more domestically:

If I have you, my imaginary friends will say, “You’ve won.”

Shakespeare will nod from upstairs

The afternoon will quarrel quietly with the window then,

the curtain will bow

the smell of ginger and milk will rise

and I’ll think, you are impossible.

(“Impossible” 1-6)

Shakespeare nods from upstairs, as if the canon has moved into the same building. The afternoon quarrels, the curtain bows, ginger and milk rise, and the room becomes a small domestic stage for a feeling the speaker can only call “impossible.”

“Before Sleep” lets the inherited lyric address become tender and self-conscious at once:

I’ll call you just before sleep.

We’ll say nothing important and deep.

You’ll tell me about a crack in the ceiling.

I’ll describe a streetlight that has a feeling.

Then “O I’m yours O you’re mine.”

Our breathing so ordinary will align.

How cringe, and O how fine.

Now open the fridge and bring me wine.

("Before Sleep" 1-8)

The rhyme moves through intimate cliché with deliberate ease: "I'll call you just before sleep," "O I'm yours O you're mine," "Our breathing so ordinary will align." The admission, "How cringe, and O how fine," keeps embarrassment and affection together. Romantic address remains available, but only with humour beside it. The closing demand to "open the fridge and bring me wine" pulls lyric tenderness back into ordinary domestic speech, where affection, cliché, awkwardness, and humour share the same register.

"Agreement" gives this intimacy a screen-bound form:

In public places, eye contact is considered

a form of agreement.

Contracts are shorter.

Betrayals are rarer, but sharper.

When you look at me through the screen,

I feel briefly bound to a future

I haven't signed.

I don't look away.

("Agreement" 1-8)

A public norm of eye contact becomes contractual once it passes through the screen.

"Agreement," "contracts," "betrayals," and "signed" give digital presence the language of obligation, as though looking itself has entered a legal or emotional document. The final refusal,

“I don’t look away,” keeps that attachment active. The bond remains mediated, physically absent, and uncertain, yet it still holds emotional force.

“Half-Open” holds address at the edge of articulation:

Do you think windows are open,
half open,
Can we turn off the distant lights
and stretch my arms into the lucid
darkness
and tell you who you are
to tell you I am shameless?
(“Half-Open” 1-7)

The syntax hesitates around confession. The window is neither open nor closed, and the declaration hovers between naming the other and exposing the self almost in the same breath. Intimacy remains half-open, suspended between address, darkness, and admission.

Memory takes over this inward movement in “Stolen”:

Only this I entrust you with
is mine,
the way once in my childhood
in the month of Ashar,
I stole a mango and ran home
through the windy rice field,
this too, stolen, ripening still.
(“Stolen” 1-7)

Possession remains unsettled. What was once stolen in childhood returns as something entrusted, and the past continues to ripen inside the present. The mango carries sweetness, guilt, gift, and claim at once, turning inheritance into something taken, kept, and still becoming.

Language passes through *Adjunct City* as speech, sound, song, joke, allusion, hesitation, and memory. English carries the collection's main movement, while Bangla, Hindi, prayer, insult, cliché, and literary echo enter with their own situations still attached. A streetlight blinks like Hamlet, Shakespeare nods from upstairs, a song is followed through sound before translation, and a stolen mango keeps ripening inside memory. Language remains in motion, passing through rooms, streets, screens, objects, and the body.

VI. The Long Letting Go

The shorter poems in the collection often appear as brief intervals of stillness. Fragments like “Towel” and “Moth” stay with small, nearly static observations: an orange towel swaying, an insect resting against a lit windowpane. Their scale is slight, but the pause is not empty. They hold what continues quietly at the edge of movement, where a cloth, a moth, a window, or a small shift of light can carry the feeling of something gradually loosening its hold.

This quiet interval settles around a lit window in “Moth”:

Window opposite glows all night.

Someone types fast.

Or fights. Or makes tea for no one.

A moth lands on the pane.

Stays longer than expected.

(“Moth” 1-5)

The lit window offers several possible lives: someone typing, fighting, or making tea for no one. None is entered or clarified. Attention settles instead on the moth resting against the pane, staying “longer than expected.” The small persistence of the insect holds the scene in suspension, keeping the opposite room present as a glimpse.

In “Wave,” the observation turns on repetition:

Concrete roof.

Clothesline.

A child flies a kite from two buildings away.

She waves.

He doesn't see.

She waves again.

("Wave" 1-6)

Concrete roof, clothesline, and kite hold the scene at a distance. The wave crosses two buildings and fails to arrive. Then it returns. "She waves again" leaves the gesture small, unanswered, and still in motion.

While these micro-poems hold attention at the scale of a single, static pause, "Rickshaw or Walk?" marks a sudden expansion in form and movement. The quiet background gestures open into a longer passage through the crowded textures of the city. Its sprawling paragraph form resists standard stanza breaks, matching the continuous, uneven flow of the urban street:

List, list, O list! If thou didst ever thy dear father love, then run, now, to the corner store and return with eggs before Maghrib. Azan ripples through the buildings like wind over the pond, the sky's hue tilts from blistering brass to blue ash. Rickshaw or walk. The city demands answers to questions that do not matter. We could walk. Float. The street itself is a river made of movement, the currents of people and fumes and half-formed songs carrying us forward. Let us go while it does not sleep but turns. Its lungs are made of dust and engines. Mornings break with rickshaw clatter and the wail of a baby somewhere above the sixth floor. A boy sells phone chargers from a plastic sheet. A girl in a dusty school uniform chews sugarcane. Kapor shukayni! The laundry again, threatened by rain or crows or both. In the midst of it all, let us go... ("Rickshaw or Walk?" 1-9)

The Ghost's command from *Hamlet*, "List, list, O list! / If thou didst ever thy dear father love" (1.5.22–23), enters a street-level setting. In Shakespeare's play, the appeal to filial love

initiates a tragic obligation of revenge. In “Rickshaw or Walk?,” its structure of persuasion recalls a familiar colloquial appeal: do it if you love me. The urgency is redirected towards the household demand to return with eggs. Placed alongside groceries, the allusion carries tragic ceremony into the ordinary negotiations of daily life.

The title “Rickshaw or Walk?,” appearing as a question, keeps failing to arrive at an answer. Though it seems to offer a simple choice between transport and walking, that choice is shaped by the bodily, social, and economic conditions of moving through the city. To walk is never only to move freely, to take a rickshaw is never only to be carried. The city demands answers to “questions that do not matter,” yet such questions determine how the body spends itself in public space. The street becomes an obligation, hunger, insult, lyric memory, weather, and a practical decision. The poem moves because the street moves. The speaker, though bound to return by the evening, is carried further forward, “Let us go...” (“Rickshaw or Walk?” 9) like Eliot’s Prufrock:

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
 The muttering retreats
 Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
 And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
 Streets that follow like a tedious argument
 Of insidious intent
 To lead you to an overwhelming question...
 Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’
 Let us go and make our visit.
 (“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” 4-12)

Both poems rework the figure of urban wandering, retaining the energy of *flânerie* without its inherited leisure. Prufrock moves through an urban atmosphere of “half-deserted streets,” “one-night cheap hotels,” and “sawdust restaurants,” yet his wandering is less an act of free metropolitan observation than an act of threshold. The “muttering retreats” through which he moves are spaces of withdrawal as much as passage, suggesting where the city permits him entry and where it withholds it. The speaker of “Rickshaw or Walk?” is even further from the leisurely *flâneur* because the speaker’s movement is shaped by practical urgency. “What to a *flâneur* is a daffodil?” (“Rickshaw or Walk?” 10) is playful, sharp, and self-aware, recognising that an old metropolitan figure cannot be brought into this city unchanged. The movement passes through “puddles and shouting and life,” overripe jackfruit, spilt diesel, metallic heat, tea-stained mornings, tyre-smudged evenings, cracked phone screens, a man cursing at the kerb, and the smog into which he disappears (14-17). The street is texture before it is an idea. It is smelled, heard, crossed, and endured.

The poem’s length, however, allows the city to appear as an accumulation rather than panorama. A panorama requires distance, but accumulation depends on contact. “Rickshaw or Walk?” moves through partial intensities: *Azan* rippling through buildings, the sky tilting from brass to blue ash, wet laundry, falling shiuli petals, Tagore whispering from a lit-up screen, women beating pillows on balconies, children learning verses under dim bulbs, and a man on the roof talking to a star he mistakes for a drone. These details gather through motion, while no single image transforms into an emblem. The city continues, and the poem’s form follows that continuance. The passage slows when it reaches “the boy”:

Remember the boy who lives where our maps grow vague? Far across apartments
with their security guards and lights that flicker back to life when the load-shedding

ends, far across the gated dreams of concrete and insurance, behind the wall painted with mango juice ads, under tin roofs like old armour. Smoky breath rising from fires built of broken furniture and old exam scripts. No older than fifteen? The uneven chappals carry newspapers stairwell to stairwell, the weight of headlines and mother's medicine. A brother, a courier, a boy, shoulders broad as the city lanes. He is found as the sky goes from tangerine to an exhausted grey, in the corner of the field behind our large apartments, curled into himself like the dog, the newspaper unopened in his lap. Plays his flute. A kind of weeping, I think to myself. No performance. No words. Tears that belong not to us, to sorrow neither, but to living too much and too young. Tears the kind that soak into soil unnoticed, with songs buried beneath the ground like rotted leaves, to spring as cucumbers. Life! Ridiculous and green and full of aches. How have you written of such boys, buses with bones, girls whose dreams rattle inside lunchboxes? ("Rickshaw or Walk?" 18-29)

Passing through a dense texture of urban life, the passage narrows towards a sense of spatial inequality. The boy is found "where our maps grow vague," at the edge of what the speaker can know, "far across apartments with their security guards," beyond "gated dreams of concrete and insurance," behind walls, under tin roofs, amid the smoky breath of fires made from broken furniture and old exam scripts. These details place his life within distance, labour, and uneven protection: newspapers carried from stairwell to stairwell, mother's medicine, and a body with "shoulders broad as the city lanes." Tenderness and discomfort coexist, held in the same image of survival.

The boy's flute becomes one of the poem's central acoustic marks. He is found curled into himself with the newspaper unopened in his lap, playing his flute. The speaker calls it "a kind of weeping," then clarifies the scene, "No performance. No words." The flute sound sits outside artistic escape or resolution. Detached from formal performance, it becomes an unpolished, ordinary marker of survival, offering the observer no simple consolation. "Tears that belong not to us, to sorrow neither, but to living too much and too young" recognises the feeling while keeping ownership away from the speaker. The boy's tears belong to a life lived too early under too much demand. Life is approached and then left to continue in its own way, like tears that may pass unnoticed by others but still offer a private form of release. The image of tears soaking unnoticed into the soil brings the passage into conversation with Stephen Spender's *Vienna*, where buried songs remain beneath the ground "like rotted / leaves / to spring as cucumbers" (Spender, "Arrival at the City" 59-61). What goes unseen continues underneath, in a quiet form of endurance rather than public tragedy.

The epigraph's "Dear Passerby" has already admitted that another has seen more than the poem can hold, and "Windows are confessions. / None yours" has marked the limits carried by visible life. The speaker sees the boy, hears the flute, thinks through the images, and then moves on, almost humming:

Pukarta chala hoon main gali gali bahar ki⁶, alleys do not echo back. They just carry on. I remember her. O keno tokhon uriye aanchol khola chule baire elo...⁷ Always wind, always motion, as if the city could never keep her still. Let us go, past lives behind glass, women beating pillows on balconies like old drums, children learning verses under dim bulbs, a man on the roof talking to a star he mistakes for a drone.

⁶ Mohammed Rafi, "Pukarta Chala Hoon Main," Saregama, 1965.

⁷ Manna Dey, "O Keno Eto Sundari Holo," Saregama, 1984.

That house, its red grill and peeling paint, is more beautiful than you. A house that breathes, like this city. With its gasps and its laughter, its unbearable tenderness.

("Rickshaw or Walk?" 30-37)

The city is made audible as a multilingual field. "Jwor Hobe," "Ice-cream'ola," "Seat Achhe!," "Kapor shukayni!," "madarchod," and the song fragments "O keno tokhon uriye aanchol khola chule baire elo...," "Pukarta chala hoon main gali gali bahar ki" remain inside the collection's largely English movement as they are. Their unchanged forms preserve the situations of their arrival: vendor's call, bus cry, laundry warning, insult, remembered song, sudden mental return. "Pukarta chala hoon main gali gali bahar ki" moves through alleys that "do not echo back," while "O keno tokhon uriye aanchol khola chule baire elo..." returns almost like an image inside the speaker's mind, something the urban bustle cannot dislodge. Street speech and inward recall move together; the physical city is crossed by an interior soundscape moving alongside it.

Although "Rickshaw or Walk?" uses an extended form, its progression recalls Poe's claim that "a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones, of brief poetical effects" (Poe 462). Its movement passes through individual impressions, letting each fragment register on its own terms before shifting to the next part of the street. The shorter fragments isolate a single concentrated moment, while the longer form gathers multiple moments beside one another in an unsettled movement.

The poem's ending places the speaker under judgment: "I hear the boy's distant flute. O Piper from Hamelin, here all are humans but me, take your rat" ("Rickshaw or Walk?" 38-39). The address is bitter, strange, slightly comic, and ethically unsettled. Having moved through the city as both observer and participant, the speaker now casts the self as the rat to be taken away.

The Pied Piper becomes a figure of removal, guilt, and failed belonging. The boy returns one final time through distant sound, his flute carrying the scene back, still unresolved. The speaker's discomfort lies in having witnessed the boy while lacking any adequate response to his life. The lyric attention reaches its limit where hearing remains possible, but the answer does not.

To write from beside the city is to stay close to its lives, objects, sights, and sounds while accepting that the city always exceeds what the poem can contain. The passerby goes on, the towel sways, the shutter rises again, and the boy's flute remains distant. The page stops, but what it has touched continues elsewhere. The city remains unfinished because life inside it is still at work, beyond possession, beyond completion, and still near.

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