

# Imtiaz Dharker

## Six Poems North and South



Six Poems North and South was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival and Manchester Art Gallery in response to the New North and South programme of exhibitions celebrating the shared heritage of South Asia and the North of England. The work was performed in the galleries on Friday 20th October as part of the 2017 Manchester Literature Festival.

Manchester Literature Festival

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## The Jump

At last he comes out of his room  
and his skin is webbed, his face masked

in red, but I can see where he has sewn  
the pieces of polyester together,

and where he has zipped himself in.  
When I squeeze this super-hero's arm

he is still my boy inside,  
nothing but bone.

*Come for food, I say, khaman-dhoklas are hot,  
aunties and uncles are waiting.*

*But he says, If somebody told you it was easy  
to grow another skin, they lied.*

So we are in the sitting-room,  
hunger rumbling, the smell of food

calling from the kitchen, watching him  
jump off the sofa. He is whispering,

*Go web! Up, up and away, web!  
Shazam!*

Then, knees bent to his chest,  
he sails over Bolton,

Leicester, Brent, New York.  
The carpet becomes a map of the world

and in front of my eyes he is owning  
this other skin, crossing a line.

He is strange and beautiful,  
and no longer mine.



## Zikr

This line is the first breath,  
this dash the last

and here, where the hand moved  
back and forth, is the pulse

that lives past death  
and looks like love.



## **The garden gnomes are on their mobile phones**

Headphones on, the gnomes  
will never know the sound

of the common yarrow  
trying to grow.

The plumbago can hardly hear itself  
think over passing buses, sirens, drills,

washing machines, tumble-dryers,  
beeping tills.

The gnomes are online  
or out at the shops, buying

portable speakers, voice recognition  
software, high-top sneakers,

not caring if the lobelia is trying  
to breathe over the harsh kiss

of pesticide and sewage  
spewed out from factories.

The gnomes are busy  
watching Game of Thrones,

jamming buttons on controllers,  
checking their likes on mobile phones.

For the basil, time moves in slow-motion  
and the gnomes are a passing blur.

The money plant and marigold  
are in conversation. They remember

a time when there was water nearby  
and they could sense it,

a time before cars and their fumes,  
before gnomes.

The world is in the tiny hands  
of those with cash hidden

under the flower-beds, or stashed  
in socks.

The garden gnomes are devious.  
They are singing

lullabies  
to the unsuspecting phlox.





### **Send this**

Do not send me a postcard  
of the city that once lived here,  
its water-courses and its domes.  
No photograph can show that this  
was once home, and that home  
is long gone.

Do not send me a miniature  
drawn with a camel's-hair brush  
to hang on my wall, or tell me  
you were in the Anarkali Bazaar,  
or say the gulmohar trees were aflame  
and koels sang there.

Everything changes. Remind me  
of this when the light falls aslant  
on things not quite made, girders laid  
over half-drawn plans, haggled over  
and paid, the truth retold and sold  
in new-built malls.

With the wrong key, I come  
to this place and try to unlock it.



Air-conditioners rattle and spit  
at the back of suburban villas.  
Someone here has built a room,  
left space for a window,

opened a door, a desire.  
Do not mock it. In an almost-done  
world, send me this, knowing  
nothing is ever fixed. I will carry  
the unfinished walls of my city  
with me, in my pocket.



### **This line, that thread**

Draw a line from finger to heart.  
Draw the water from well to mouth.  
Place a mark where the words were said,  
map the distance from north to south.

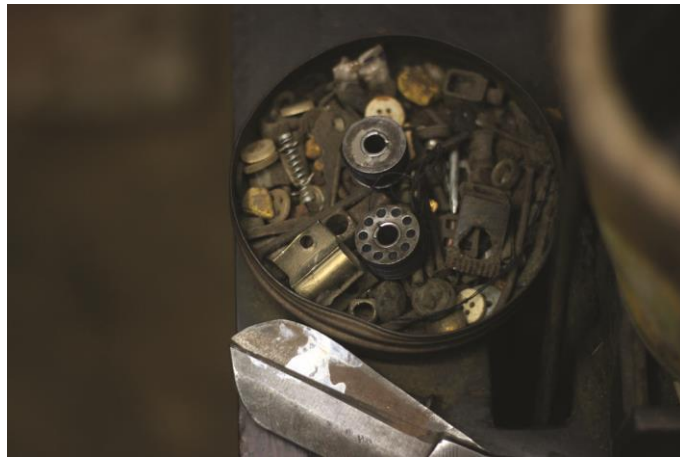
Take it apart and start again.

Look out of the window at your neighbour.  
Look in the mirror at your own face.  
Breathe on the glass to blur the border,  
watch it become an unowned space.

Wipe it away and begin again.

Hold the end of a single thread,  
loop it to others, weave it to lace.  
Spread it out to see if the holes  
are an imperfection or a kind of grace

with their open heart, their otherness.



## Drain

What comes out of this place  
is rust-coloured water, mountains of scraps  
tossed away, the after-taste of excess  
on the tongue, the long squirm  
of it in the heart, the lurch of too much.

All this should lurk and hide, but  
it is out there on show like a wedding party  
with dancers, brass bands, flaunting  
itself to the world. *This is how much  
I can afford, it says, to throw away.*

Out with drums pounding,  
tassels shaking, all the red and gold  
in the world weighing down the bride  
till she is on her knees, saying  
*Please*, but not finishing, exhausted

by the whole thing, by being sold  
out. Struggling out of cracks  
are the hands that are too small, not  
reaching up for help, not reaching,  
because what is there but air,

and even that used up, drained?