

defiant, and challenge in their own inimitable way the patriarchal dispensation that pins them down to a gender identity from which they try to free themselves. They do not always succeed but they sometimes do, reenvisioning their lives bravely tracing their paths that will take them into as yet uncharted territory as do Giribala and the mother in 'Sparrows'.

They see their societies and cultures through eyes not veiled by social conventions and received ways of seeing. They discern the chinks in the armour of moral righteousness – 'the black and white morality', to use Kamala Wijeratne's discerning phrase in 'Death by Drowning' (Sri Lanka, 425-31) – and interrogate the accepted norms of behaviour and belief. These powerless women empower themselves through their strength of belief and principle, even challenging the might of powerful states as does the young Li Xiang.

*Speaking for Myself* is a selection of writings compiled with sensitivity which affords the reader a rich sampling of the writings of Asian women. Its defining feature is its refusal to impose an editorial viewpoint on the reader. The women speak for themselves, articulating their nuanced experiences of need, protest, suffering and the rare moments of happiness. We are afforded a glimpse into their lives as we discern the subtextual threads that run through their writings, and indeed their lives. Although often addressing culturally specific issues the writings reach out beyond Asian readers as we see the deeper dimensions and wider relevance of these questions. They create a redefinition of female selfhood, overturning the image of Asian woman as a construct of patriarchy, not passive and submissive, but strong, energetic and dynamic. The Pakistani poet Kishwar Naheed encapsulates this idea poetically in 'Who Am I?' (384), rebelling against the shackles that attempt to suppress her: 'I am the one you hid beneath/the weight of traditions' and emerging fearless and free. 'For you never knew that light can never fear pitch darkness.' ■

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## I'M A DOG (a true story)

I'm a dog  
not so rare  
a mongrel with mange  
No care no fair  
I wander around  
nose to the ground  
eyes full of sight  
ears full of sound

This neighbourhood  
is a creepy place  
walls are high  
locks are great  
servants are fat  
thin ladies bake  
cops asleep  
thieves awake

Then came the day  
the timing was right  
knife held to a child  
No fight no flight  
a mother's fear  
a woman's fear  
the thief had a hard-on  
I had a beer

Too late to bark  
end of the game  
took a mother's shame  
to keep the hostage safe  
nobody asked  
So I didn't tell  
thief had no name  
had a face, had a smell

by Zymurgy