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Lines to a Rickshaw Puller

Chandran D. S. Devanesen

I pass you every morning
on my way to the station.
The light is raw and the wind is keen.
All around you the city is stretching its limbs
and wiping the sleep from its eyes.
The raucous voice of the crow is everywhere.
But you hear nothing, you see nothing.
You lie curled up in your rickshaw
with sprawling limbs and inert body
like some tired animal.
Some mother must have cradled you
pressing you against the soft comfort
of her warm breasts.
But now you shape your body
to fit the wooden embrace
of the hard sides of your rickshaw
for its walls are your home, your rented home.
Your intimacy with it is very great.
Your worldly possessions are in the box
under the seat with its torn fibre cushion
keeping company with your oil lamps,
the battered old *topee*
you wear on rainy days,
and a few *beedis*.
The shafts are worn smooth
by the contact of your forearms.
The rickshaw and you—
you belong together.
I have passed you by at other times—
when you were not asleep
and something of your life
has trailed after me.
I remember the laughter of your fellows
as you twitted the grain seller
who sits by the rickshaw stand
until the old hag exposed her gums
in a toothless grin ... [p. 279](#)
I have watched you fight with your creditors
with the ferocity of a trapped beast
over pitiful sums, the price of a packet of fags.
I have heard you whine for a fare
when the day's earnings were poor.
I have seen you resentful and bitter
when you spat on the ground
and talked unconscious communism.

I pass you by like a hundred others
 who also pass you by—
 and the road may be the road
 from Jerusalem to Jericho for all we know.
 I would like to put my hand on your shoulder
 and say to you, 'Comrade,
 there is One who died for us
 and dying made us blood brothers.'
 But I am filled with the cowardice of the well-dressed—
 for clothes are by no means flimsy
 when it comes to erecting barriers
 between man and man.
 I am afraid you will wake with a start
 and betray resentment in your eyes
 as you see in me what I really am—
 your well-dressed enemy.
 And then you will acknowledge defeat
 and put on your mask of patient stupidity.
 You will jump up and dust the seat
 and grin and point to it with a flourish of your hand.
 You will want us to sell our brotherhood
 for eight *annas*.

Day after day I pass you by,
 you the man by the roadside
 and I the priest and the Levite rolled in one,
 passing you by.

The late Dr. Devanesen was Director for the Institute for Development Education, Madras, India. He was formerly Principal of Madras Christian College, Madras, and Vice Chancellor of North East Hill University, Shillong, Assam. p. 280

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