

Iftekhar Sayeed

Plutonium

It is rare to name a chemical element after a living person. But Glenn Seaborg had an exceptional claim to that honour . . . DR.Seaborg was recruited into the Manhattan Project (America's wartime effort to build an atomic bomb) . . . When the bomb was built, however, he was among the Manhattan scientists who put their names to a letter to President Truman asking that the Japanese be given a demonstration—and a chance to surrender—before the device was used on a city. Their plea was rejected.

—Obituary, *The Economist*

Not everyone can have an element
Named after him. Seaborgium. Nice sound.
Explosive.

He died at the age of 86.
The Japanese today live that long, don't they?
Ironical, that. They weren't meant for war
But peace and a long life. Pass the *sake*.
They had no choice, but to defend themselves,
Ever since Perry's gunboats announced the West.
Defence equaled offence, and to be free
Was to enslave, and to be free of the West
Was to mimic the West—now, anamnesis shows
Mimesis to have been their worst offence.
Invention proved too individual,
Like conscience, and no Seaborg in the East.

unto others

we do not ask
“what has western
civilisation done
to native
americans?”

we do not ask
“what has western
civilisation done
to africans?”

we do not ask
“what did western
civilisation do
to our forefathers?”

we ask
“what can western
civilisation do
for me?”

when we should ask
“what will western
civilisation do
to us?”

The Third

At school, they didn't teach me there were other people.
My parents focused—Asian-like—on grades.
(Others either got more or less than I did.)
There were only relatives, and everything was relative.

Until I went to the bazaar.
There was noise, and dirt, and haggling,
And an odour of fish, which was present at home
But in a subtle, cooked way.

I discovered other people
In the number, two.
I am x
and you are y
And x and y are not one, but separate.
And we both exist.

For the first time
I noticed time.
What *kept* us separate?
Then I glimpsed the man in khaki
Round the corner,
Whom everyone respected, and feared.
He wore a watch.

The watch smashed against a brick and stopped:
Someone had stabbed him in the back.
And where he had stood there appeared a god
And we were all one, brothers—
Fratricidal.

the wisdom of children

children are wiser
Wordsworth claimed
closer to the good

in 1952
they took to the streets
of Dacca
chanting slogans
challenging the powers
to preserve their
language

while their fathers
stayed home
fearing losing
their jobs
if they joined

the wisdom of children
led to the deaths
of children
shot on the streets
of Dacca

let few nations
beget such children
born on the streets
of Paris
in 1789

on that dawn when
bliss was it
to be
alive