




# POETRY, LOST IN NON-TRANSLATION

Jeet Thayil, award-winning author, poet and musician, on life, drugs and what he absolutely hates doing the most — writing

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 "I hate writing," says Jeet Thayil, who is not known to mince words. "I honestly hate it," he adds. The poet, author, filmmaker and musician (he efficiently manages all of these jobs) was in the city for a workshop where poets translated the work of other poets, he says. "I thought it would be fairly boring. But this workshop was something else. I saw miracles take place every day when we translated the works of other poets into English." Adding, "The first poem that I wrote was a translation of *Le Lethe* by Charles Baudelaire."

"Till 12 years of age, I was a fiendish child, who was very happy. But when I turned 13, I stopped being happy. I began to see the world in a different way. I started reading more and then I also gave my parents a very different kind of trouble," says Jeet, adding, "So when people tell me that I write dark poems and that I must have had a traumatic childhood, I always feel surprised," he adds.

One thing Jeet finds lacking in India is the fact that we don't translate our own poems. "In India, we don't translate our own poems into any other Indian language. How many Telugu poems are translated into Malayalam? We're losing out on so much there," he says.

Jeet's journey might seem like one filled with fame and adulation — take for instance his first novel *Narcopolis*, which won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature and was also shortlisted for the 2012 Man Booker Prize — or his collection of poetry. But, Jeet has faced his share of demons, one in particular — drug addiction.

"It was a difficult phase. I once counted the number of times that I was in and out of rehab and detox and it turned out to be 34. At one point I felt that there wouldn't be a future, but to be able to rise above all that and be here is an achievement, a sad one, but an achievement nonetheless," he says. While Jeet was working as a journalist in a newspaper in New York, at a job he hated, he couldn't leave the job because the salary paid for the drugs. "I was a very punctual employee with a terrible boss. For two decades I worked at a place that I hated. But when I quit drugs in 2002, I realised I didn't need the job either," he explains.

Jeet's work, *Collected Poems*, features some old and new works. "Going back and picking up poems that I wrote as a young guy back in 1992 felt very different. It felt like a very violent act because I changed the poems quite a bit," he says. Currently, Jeet is working on a novel. "Actually, I've been working on that for the past four years," he says laughing. "And I've told myself that if I don't finish it this year, I will stop writing."

And after all that life threw at him, when you ask Jeet, what is that one lesson that he has learnt and he simply says, "Well, don't trust lessons."

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Jeet battled drug addiction and worked at a place that he "absolutely hated". Once he quit drugs in 2002, he realised that he didn't need his job of two decades

