

Poet's Corner

HIV takes Atlanta's Vimal Jairath from science to art.

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"I didn't choose poetry. Poetry chose me," Vimal Jairath says. Not long after he talked his way into a 1995 protease inhibitor trial ("I really know how to work the system"), Jairath found his muse. "Poetry saved my life," says the 44-year-old, nicknamed Vim. "Though my poetry comes from despair, it gives me hope."

Like many poets, Jairath writes about the things he knows best, including the side effects caused by his current drug cocktail regimen. In "Dreams," he recalls the nightmares brought on by Crixivan (indinavir):

*I wake up, my sheets soaking wet
another crazy, vivid, weird dream
Taking this protease inhibitor has turned
my restful sleep to dreams of terror.*

Jairath trained as a physicist in his native India before emigrating to the United States at 19 to study business at the University of Chicago. Nine years ago, he moved to Atlanta to work in the international finance department of BellSouth. The job offered good money, but Jairath didn't cotton to life in the heart of Dixie. "I found that Southern hospitality is a myth," he says. His duties at BellSouth required extensive travel, and when the wear and tear of it became too much for Jairath -- HIV positive since the early '80s -- he reluctantly accepted disability in 1993.

These days, he lives for his art. He writes about the anniversaries he can no longer celebrate with his late lover: Everything reminds me of you... Didn't know it would be so tough to go on living without you... He writes about his post-protease adjustment to the idea of a future: ... you never thought that the certainty of death would be replaced by the uncertainty of life. Some of his poems are poignant, while others, like "Smooth," are whimsical:

*Men used to love my legs and behind
so hairy, golden brown and virile...
Twelve months on indinavir
I am losing my fur*

With 120 poems in his collection -- all pecked out on a keyboard by a former scientist who can't type -- Jairath is hoping to publish a book soon. He has shaped his writing in workshops around the country, and posted his poems on the Internet. A few days ago, he learned that a group of Key West senior citizens are reading his words at their weekly roundtable. "If my words can help someone through the pain and suffering I've been through, I'll be honored," Jairath says. The flurry of online responses to his poetry includes a 74-year-old housewife who's losing an old friend, and an HIV positive, bisexual married man in Colorado who has no one to talk to.

"I never knew there was this side of me," Jairath says. "I'm blooming like a flower. I was nipped in the bud as a child. First by society, then by academia, then by more academia, then by the scientific establishment, then by the business world. Now, I'm coming to life."

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