

My father would see a jaguar and think it was the Bengal tiger?  
Tell Amit. As the gods in India kept nudging me.

Wilfully I transported myself back to the Amazon. I also yearned  
to be back in Canada with Lake Superior before me...as I looked down  
from twenty thousand feet high in a jet plane. Yes, I kept seeing Canada's  
thousands of lakes and rivers, from an iPod.

Yes, Amit would indeed come to visit me, just as Professor  
Samdhi really wanted. Like an omen: "India stays with you; you're never  
the same after coming here. It takes months, years to get such a country  
out of your system. The gods follow you everywhere."

*Even in the Arctic cold?* Arms and legs folded, I began feeling  
like a deity. Amit sat next to me in the living room, being so devout.  
He held his breath. I remembered doing the same as a teen in Guyana.

Amit eyed me, solemnly.

A deeper consciousness, eternal bliss. What I must now cope  
with.

I inhaled harder, my eyes still closed. Amit or Professor Samdhi...  
yes, I was in the attic with them, nowhere else.

Time passing by.

Gagan Gill

## Hour of Father, Hour of Death

*Translated by Kuldip Singh from the original in Hindi*

*Our feet are bitten alike by wanderlust...*

you said

*Our foreheads are scarred alike with a wound...*

I say

### One

One day not long ago, it would seem, you'd set out only to come hurrying  
back the next. From another city. As if someone had called out to you.

'Is everything all right, Mahinder?' you ask my mother as you  
walk in.

She is not yet my mother, or you my father. But how does that  
matter? She looks so sad, so unhappy. Some memory perhaps, of her  
parent's home, has choked her to tears. You're so fainthearted your eyes  
brim over, too. When I'm grown up I too will have a heart like yours –  
fluttering like a sparrow's. I, too, will be scoffed at. I feel like crying  
along with you two, but where I am, water fills my mouth, my nostrils.

I can hear you both sitting hunched in her womb.... There are  
still a good twenty eight days to go before I see the light of day.

It was I who had called out to you; it's I who will keep calling.  
You'll turn back halfway through from far-off cities. Every time. Fever  
will consume my spare frame till I see you, till you come home.

The moment I see you I'll reach out, my arms outstretched to  
you. You will gather me up. *Crick*. My shoulder has dislocated again.  
Now you'll take me to the *pahalwan*, the bonesetter, to have my bone set.

It will happen so often that people will wonder. There you'll be,  
forever coming back, my bone forever slipping out of its socket, my wails

rising as we turn into the alley where the *pahalwan* lives, your eyes misting over at the sight of my tears....

*This is my first pang of separation.*

This sorrow will color all my life. I'll never get over it. But we don't know it yet. By the time we do, it will be late. You'll keep saying, *But now I'm back.* I'll keep saying, *Except I'm no longer the one you left behind.*

But wait a minute, this is yet to happen.

\*

Ma is twenty three years old. You're thirty. She is a simple girl, you a rishi, a saintly man. This world, this home life, will never be worth your while.

As it is, you subjected yourself to severe contemplation in caves for forty days at a time. You read the Vedas. Before you were twenty seven years of age you'd founded a whole institution – the Nirmal Kutiya. It stretched over several acres of land. A school building, a hospital, occupational training centres...the institution grew. Having walked out on your jagirdari – your fief, you had to prove yourself to your father.

To begin with, Grandpa left you in the care of a guru, a strict disciplinarian, when you were still a toddler; yet, when it began to look like you'd found your calling, he started to fret over his feudal holdings. Is it, he wanted the best of both the worlds for you, but you'd made your choice? *Like he himself had done before you.* Will his own son turn out just like him? He would have none of it.

So, he flung you – a gangly lad of seventeen – to the ground before a crowded panchayat. With your workers watching. As if you were but a piece of luggage.... No, it was not you, he was angry with himself. All his life, he'd wandered the earth. God knows what truth he discovered. To me where I am, he looks neither a sanyasi nor a householder. He looked just plain weary.

*I can't bear to live here any longer. How will I ever face these people?* You tell Granny, back in the sprawling haveli, your magnificent mansion.

It was from this haveli that your mother had been running the

family estate since you were a five-year-old. In your name. The British had appointed her the warden of your property in father's absence. But she had had to take the matter to court. Her subjects in tow, she attended the hearings in her skirt – a baggy twenty-yard ghaghra. The estate had remained with the family but not without a struggle. She took over the charge while your father was away keeping company with holy men. A runaway griever. But your mother – she was not the one to run away. When hard times came, she took them by the horns. A fierce lone woman in the domain of men. She was the talk of the Majha.

*Father has wronged you. Don't you come back till he begs your forgiveness.*

Granny wants justice for you, and due honour. She knows you are your father's very breath of life.

\*

You're here, equipped with the capital of your mother's teachings. You've had your education at Benaras. Back home, you're determined to make it big, to strike a 'true bargain' – the *sachcha sauda* – like Baba Nanak did.

Your guru, Sant Ameer Singh-ji of Sattowalli Gully Amritsar, belonged to the Nirmal sub-sect<sup>1</sup>. He was one of the three pre-eminent commentators on the Sikh scriptures in this century. (Those in the know hold that you were way ahead of your guru. But how can we tell? We knew neither you nor him well enough.) He took you under his wings. In those three years, he rid you of your attitude, the arrogance of high birth.... The sect's in-depth interpretation of the Sikh sacred writings enjoys wide acceptance.

The Nirmal Kutiya stands as your tribute to your guru. You've one foot in the ancient Sanskrit text, the other in social service. People seek your help. You help some with their children's school fees, others with finding jobs – among them a future Home Minister in the Central Cabinet, another a proprietor of the would-be largest-selling daily in the Punjab.

And you?

*What about you?*

You'll drown.

*You have to, if you're in love.* You would have said if I could but ask you.

\*

You are in love with a poor refugee girl. You have lost all your learning. (Have you lost it all, like Karna<sup>2</sup> had at the crucial moment – haven't you?) She, the most promising girl of her family. The young headmistress of the school you run.

Every love has its pitfall. You'll find yours before long.

The friend you had sent over, to ask for her hand for you, will gaffe: 'If you're willing, you can rely on us for any financial support you may need....'

The damage has been done. My future nana will never forgive you for this. What if he is poor – too poor, maybe, to provide even two square meals a day to his family? But such arrogance? If you're so conceited, he insists he too is a full-blooded Rajput Sikh!

Go take the plunge, if you're in love. Give up all you have. Go someplace else. Become a faceless man.

\*

You'll leave a faceless man, and remain one. Every love opens an abyss. There's something you already know about it, something that you don't. The day you take your plunge, you'll turn your back on everything. You'll walk away without a second glance. There goes your pomp and glory; there goes your name and standing.... It was all maya, an illusion.

Time and again this will happen with you. You will not look back. Ever.

Was it for this day you sought out all that learning?

\*

You look so lonely and forlorn that I want to come into the world before my time. What all pilgrimages you've been making. To Allahabad, Benaras, Gaya-Bodh Gaya, Patna, Vrindavan, Barsana, Harimandir Sahib. What are the prayers you want answered?

Everything will be all right, once I'm out there with you. I'll be your plaything, your rag-doll. Just wait.

\*

I have come. It is the third of Margsheersh (November) – dark half of the month. The nurse has let you in the room after four hours. You watch in silence the bundle that I am. *Take a good look.* This is yours, all of it. The tag on my tiny wrist bears your name. Here, look for yourself.

Well, well! Why those tears? This is the problem with you. You can bear neither joy nor sorrow. I too will take after you. Watch out! I'll be what you both are. Don't hold it against me then.

\*

*He made an offering of rupees thirty-one at your feet, and bowed his head. Said, gratefully, that you were his Goddess Lakshmi. Thirty-one rupees was a lot of money for us then...*

Ma is crying. So am I.

You're no more. We weep, alone. This is my first birthday without you. I'm forty... and back to age one. Next year, I'll be two without you, then three....

Where have you gone, Taji?

\*

Ma tells me the first word that I uttered was Taji, not Ma. I learned to say Daarji much later...when I was already seven. You were Daarji to us all brothers and sisters.

But Taji – that you have been to me alone. That you'll be only mine. Till the end.

\*

*One morning when Kabir<sup>3</sup> went into the temple he found Guru-ji lying flat on the floor, face down. Unmoving, unspeaking. How could he speak? He was gone. Kabir was overcome with grief. This hymn that you read in the Granth was recited by him then.*

*Baba bolte te, kahan gaye? Not thé but té.<sup>4</sup>*

*Baba bolte te...*

The Baba<sup>5</sup> that would speak, where is he gone?

He who in this body dwelt

Endowed it with consciousness

Danced, gave discourse

The Baba that spoke, where was he gone?

Those days if at all Daarji talked he talked about detachment. A quiet man; he wouldn't even ask us what we'd learned at school. Anyway, when he did talk, he went straight to Kabir, Guru Nanak, Bhishma, Karna, Guru Tegh Bahadur. Or, to the two Sahibzadas, the sons<sup>6</sup> of Guru Gobind Singh, being bricked in....

*Esteemed Sir, the kneecap is in the way. The wall is going to be uneven. Shall I chip off a part of the brick?* asks the mason.

*Why break the brick? Break the kneecap. The wall must be flat...* says the Qazi.

Two princes. Baba Zorawar Singh, Baba Fateh Singh. Barely five and seven years old.

We're quite grown up. How can we be like other children?

\*

Tonight is the sixth night. The night of Fate.

It's a cold November night. You're waiting outside on a bench, in the corridor of Irwin Hospital. You're not allowed into the ward.

Mother Fate will visit me tonight. She'll pass by here. Had I been born at home, you'd have had a clay oil-lamp to light her way. Now you don't want to sleep even a wink. You're keen to know what Fate she will write on your daughter's forehead. You've already given necessary instructions to my mother.

Next morning you ask her how was our night. She tells you she kept feeding me all night, while I kept passing water. The night was also pretty cold, wasn't it?

You shake your head. *No! How is it possible?*

*But it's a fact.*

*So is this what our daughter will be like all her life? Outwardly full, empty inside... What has Mother Fate gone and done?*

The baby-girl smiles in her sleep. Mother Fate is playing with her.

This will be a lifelong game. It'll change but some in the years

ahead. Your daughter will laugh during the day, cry in her sleep. Mother Fate will shrug. *This is all I had for you. Bear it. Brave it.*

You'll keep calling your girl every now and then on phone. *Is it you? Are you all right?*

*Why, what could go wrong with me, Daarji?*

*You keep it all bottled up inside but I know better. In a dream I saw that...*

*Stop seeing so many dreams, Daarji. Sleep soundly.*

Taji!

Taji!

Where are you?

\*

Is this my first memory? I'm so small. Just how small, I'm not sure. All I remember is that everything around me looks big.

There is a black rock. I teeter on it. A snake-headed wave lunges at me. I catch my breath in fear.

*Daarji, did I ever drown?*

*No.*

*Made to drown, sort of?*

*Well! I remember we'd gone to the Sangam<sup>7</sup> in Allahabad for a holy dip. You were just about a year old then. We stood you on an outcrop, and took turns to bathe. Suddenly I noticed a big wave break out. At once I reached out to snatch you off the rock. You came crashing onto my chest. You could have drowned otherwise...*

Is this why in my dreams I often see I am drowning?

\*

A dream. A rebirth, as it were.

A mountain peak, desolate. I'm playing in its shadow. My playmate is my own age – about two years old.

Suddenly, it gets dark. An interlude. Looks like a stone has hit me on my head.

I open my eyes. We've known each other before.  
I shut my eyes. The dream recurs. The head hurts again.  
What, did it happen twice over?

\*

I ask of a poet-friend. He has some insight into the secrets of the soul. I recount my dream to him.

*Do you have a scar on your forehead?*  
*I do.*  
*Have you had it since before you were four years old?*  
*That's right.*  
He becomes quiet. As if trying to make up his mind.  
*It may be possible.*  
*What?*  
*What you see in your dream may be true...*

\*

You too had a scar on your forehead. To the left. A large one. From early childhood.

There's one on brother's forehead as well. I have it, too.  
Does it run in the family? Some secret distinguishing mark carried over from previous lives?

\*

Had you been with me now, you'd have laughed.  
Had you been here, you'd have said: *Who knows? But even if these things were true, it's better to keep quiet.*  
Now that you're no more, see, how I am going on and on.  
You are watching, aren't you?

## Two

*Do you know what books Daarji reads?*  
Our child-servant Jindu asks us both when we return from school around noon.  
*No, we don't.*  
*Come, I'll show you.*

He scrambles up the cement shelves of the almirah like an ape. The books are kept on the top shelf. Some large ones are wrapped in brocade covers. I stand on a stool to take them from him. Each book is my weight, or perhaps I'm myself yet the weight of your books.

We lay them on the divan and stretch out alongside on our stomachs.

*Want me to show you pictures?*  
*Please do.*

He knows all about those pictures; he knows where to look for each. In class six, he goes to a late-hours boys' school. (When he is big, one day he'll fall to his death from a running train. Subsequently, whenever he'll come to mind we'll see him being sucked under the wheels, mangled – not this kid showing these pictures to us.)

I'm in class two. Little sister Happy is in kindergarten. Dicky is still too young to be starting school. We see her leaning out of a window to greet us with a 'Ta-ta!' as we get back home. Crazy kid, she doesn't know that you say ta-ta on parting. *Jindu, what do you say to a person on meeting him?* He doesn't know either.

*Look at this.*

I move closer for a better look. Will our Taji too look like this one day? He has half a greying head already.

*All these arrows, Jindu! Piercing him through and through! But his eyes are open. Gazing quietly up into the westerly sky. Who could have hurt such an old man?*

He does not know. In a book I have, there is a crow sporting a peacock's tail. But arrows?

I cannot get to sleep for days on end. That picture haunts me. Finally, we ask Daarji. He is at his desk.

*Taji, whose picture is it in your book?*  
*Messing about with my books, are you, Jindu?*  
*Please do tell us. Who is he?*  
*Which picture?*

We open the book at the picture. A lump rises into my throat as I look at it again. Taji is not aware of that lump. He knows nothing. He

doesn't even know that he himself will be that old man before long...

*Arrè, this is Bhisma<sup>8</sup> the patriarch. Haven't I read his story to you? I will tonight.*

I don't want him to. I know he'll go on reading from the book for so long that I'll have fallen asleep right in the middle of it. And if I did that, with my arm across my chest, some demon or a witch was sure to visit me in my dreams.

*Daarji, read it to us by day. Nights are scary.  
All right, I'll read it to you in a short while.*

At bedtime, we prefer folk tales. There are funny little short tales in a book by Vanjara Bedi. Tales about cobblers, weavers, entertainers; tales of their stupidities. These are the ones we go for at night. While Taji reads, we the three of us cling to him like baby monkeys. Dicky rides him piggyback while Happy and I squat on either side of him on the bed, our chins propped up on our arms on his knees. He holds the book on his lap.

Where is Ma?

She must be around somewhere. There is no ache in my memory of her.

One day Taji stops midway through a story. He yawns. *Now go to bed! We'll finish it tomorrow.*

The story left incomplete! The witch is sure to visit tonight.

*Finish at least this one, Taji! Please!*

*Look, I'm very tired.*

How do I put it to him? Fear surges through me; I choke on my words. *Taji!* All the three of us fall to tickling him. We poke our fingers into his sides; we scratch his soles. We resort to this whenever we fail to persuade him by other means. Lips pursed, he resists for as long as he can, then bursts into giggles. As we smell success, we go for him with renewed gusto. *Come on, finish the story, will you?*

*All right.* He resumes reading. Afterwards, he gives me a long look. *You can read for yourself now, can't you? I've already taught you the alphabet.*

*But this isn't alphabet!* Lately, Taji had started teaching me the Gurmukhi letters of alphabet. Afternoons on the roof-terrace. Combining learning with play.

In part for love of stories and in part for fear of phantoms, we've learned to read Punjabi before our time. Now it's Taji who seeks us out. *Who is going to read to us today?* he demands to know.

\*

*There's a cotton tree in Daarji's belly, you know!* Dicky announces when we're back home after school.

*How can you say?*

*I remove cotton wool from his belly button every day when he has his siesta.*

Dicky is three years old. She alone lies awake at Daarji's side when he bundles us off to bed for an hour or so in the afternoon.

*Show it to us today, will you?*

We've no patience. Daarji is taking his own time to retire.

*Aren't you sleepy today, Daarji?* Dicky Rani coaxes him.

*Come, let's catch some sleep.* He lies down, and pulls Dicky over his arm. Happy and I stretch out on the other side of him. Often the four of us take our nap together on the double bed. In a while he'll be sound asleep and we'll see for ourselves that cotton tree, leaning over forwards on our bent elbows on his stomach... The stomach will quiver, tighten into a knot under our exploring fingers, heave.

*You haven't gone to sleep yet?*

When we see him coming awake we at once flop down beside him, our breath held. He draws Dicky close over his arm again.

*Alliyan, Balliyan...*

He pats her to the accompaniment of a lullaby he has sung to all the five of us. In a voice sweet and sleepy. I've listened to music of different countries, but there's been nothing like this. It hangs together by a thread woven of solitude, drowsiness and humming. It still seems to have the power to put us to sleep. Were he around today, none of us would have the need for sleeping pills...

\*

Daarji is home for lunch every day. Into transport business, he is a sleeping partner of Prakash Roadlines. One day, when a huge loss is incurred, his partner Pritam Das, paid thirty thousand rupees inside the Sisganj<sup>9</sup> gurdwara, in the presence of Babaji embodied in the Holy Book<sup>10</sup>, would weasel out, and Daarji's hair would turn white almost overnight. Both Mummy and her brother – our Mamoo, then staying with us to pursue his studies – would pick on him: *You couldn't do without siesta. The way he was making you pay, enough for maintenance of six trucks, we knew you had this coming to you...*

The thing about siesta perhaps was true, but the heart of the matter was that Daarji couldn't do without us. Mummy would be away at college at the other end of the city all day, occupied with her doctorate thesis. A maid looked after us. She plaited our hair, put us on the school bus, and, on days we left for the bus stop a little early, came running after us with our lunch boxes. Daarji had no peace of mind until he had fed us. Nature had endowed him with a mother's heart. What he lacked were the boobs... (Dicky insisted, though, that he had the boobs as well. He'd once 'breast-fed' her when she was crying hard, even as she slammed her puny fist into his chest! Poor Daarji!)

\*

Granny continues to live in the village. She makes it a point to send us some cash now and then with her younger son Kartar. Serving in the British army, Kartar Chacha stole army bombs to lob them, like Bhagat Singh had, at the British to drive them out of the country... but was caught red-handed on the way home on furlough. Put to shame on his son's account, Grandpa practically left him out of his will. Chacha later joined the ranks of the communists. Granny kept on funding both her sons on the quiet. This chacha now stands beside Daarji in his struggle for survival. Not all the time, but often enough.

Ever since Daarji quit his estate in Jalandhar, Granny has been chipping in to help him get on with his various business plans. Once Daarji had set his course, never ever to look back, this is all she could do. She goes on, as if her battle with her late husband is not over yet. *You left my two and half years old son in your guru's care. You were neither*

*mine, nor the world's. At least you could have spared me my son...* Granny bore the bruise on her soul all her life. What sort of a man was our grandfather? Granny was never forthcoming. She only covered up for him: *He was not an earthling. He was from beyond this world.*

I could never ask Granny what lay behind Grandpa's such detachment.

\*

*But he said Guru Tegh Bahadur was our witness...*

*No, Singh Sahib!* (Whenever Mummy or Mamoo address Daarji as Singh Sahib, my heart lumps in my throat. It sounds so impersonal and offensive.) *Didn't this happen before? At your soap factory? And before that, what did your gurubhai – your brother-in-faith– did? Remember?*

*O Baba!* (Is Daarji crying out to Guru Nanak?) *But I didn't cheat anyone. What can I do if people have changed?*

\*

Whenever you are deceived you'd rather not speak out. You'll be swindled so often that at last you'll clam up altogether, as if you'd taken a vow of silence... I told you before, didn't I, this world, this home life, will never be up to you.

You too will realize this some day. Not easily, though. Not before you've lost almost all your lawsuits. You'll have lost so much you'll be beyond fear. You'll have gone beyond notions of success and failure. The day it happens, you'll be a free man. That day you'll be back to being what you were. You'll go through fire and emerge cleansed. You'll be your father's son – just as he expected you when you were small. Beyond affairs of the world. Sagacious. A man of learning.

You'll drown once again. Drowning is your family trait. Both your parents lived life immersed deep in it. Now it's you. Now you're in a different world – the World of Enquiry. Soon you'll start on research for your first book.

\*

I'll be into my twelfth year of age when I'll come to know all there is to know. Your books will be lying scattered all over the bed and the dining table. I'll know then what it takes to look for what could turn

out to be hardly a three-line reference. I'll know then the whys and wherefores of wanderings.

God knows what Ma and you keep discussing the whole night long, night after night. *Look up page so and so.* Like a dedicated pupil, Ma will open this book and that. Finally, you'll have found the clue that had eluded you the whole afternoon.

When Ma will be engaged in her own research work – to write, in the years to come, several books – you'll extend to her the kind of help she now does to you. Just before the publication of a book our home will be a centre for academic debates. Scholars will flock to our house from afar. I'll listen to them with bated breath, even though I understand little. It's very vital for me to know whether you won or lost an argument. At the end of a discussion, I'll sidle up to you. I'll touch you, proudly, on an arm or hand or knee... You are a great scholar, the very best. Let he who will ask you what he wants. You can even quote the page numbers.

*Join us on our faculty.*

First, it's Prof. Pritam Singh who invites you, then Dr. Taran Singh. They're taken up with you. But you don't want to go anywhere... neither to Amritsar nor to Patiala. You've had enough of universities. Once you leave a place behind, you leave it for good. You've found yourself a niche now – in your study. In wanderlust. *You know there's something more than losing and winning: Knowledge, Knowledge of the Self...* you'll tell me one day years later.

### Three

That's all. That's all I remember of Daarji in my childhood. I remember his letters sent from Manipur and Nagaland, from Burhanpur and Sambalpur, from Sardar Nagar in Gorakhpur. I remember the parcel of dry fruits he sent us from Afghanistan, already half-emptied by the postman through a hole in its bottom. I remember the three Iranian overcoats, in jungle green, very beautiful. They were of three different sizes for us three sisters. My size was what he'd remembered best. My sisters found theirs either too small or too big. He is my Kabuliwalla – the

Pathan pedlar from Kabul, who carried everywhere the hand print of his little one.

As I grow up, I do not seem to see much of Daarji. I take music as a subject instead of Sanskrit at school. He does not object. My classmates had scared me: *If you don't learn by heart your Sanskrit lesson, the teacher spansks you hard...*

The very same Sanskrit teacher Mrs. Arora lopes across from her classroom to ours, as if spellbound, on hearing me sing a composition in raga Bhairavi. Says, she has never before heard such melody in a child's voice. Already twelve, I understand everything. I understand what she says and what she doesn't. *There's a thorn in sweet singing bulbul's throat, they say.*

I know.

\*

Some images come blurred to mind. In these, there are the four of us. Picku is the sweetest. Daarji's heart beats for her the second best after me. I'm eleven, she is one. A wisp of cotton wool. The toilet is cleaned afresh for the three-year-old Picku. She keeps running out of each and every bathroom. Scrambles onto Daarji's lap. *Badbu...it smells!* Now Daarji calls her Badbu, and Mummy Roon-Roon – a whiner. *The nanny follows Picku about like a shadow. Perhaps that is why she is so delicate.*

And me? Daarji tells me I came under a Bengali's shadow when I was still in the womb. *He had his room across from ours. Your mother was so scared of him. Said, he peeped at her.*

*But everybody says I took after you. My forehead, my eyebrows, my eyes, my lips... I wish my face were also oval like yours! It turned out round like Ma's.*

Anyway, neither family – Daarji's or Ma's – is willing to own up my nose. Whenever the issue crops up, I'm told it's a shadow of the Bengali's!

\*

The three of us together write a letter. Picku, the youngest, must be asleep somewhere, in her nappy, inside the mosquito net.



It was my idea. Writing a letter. Jindu had shown us a number of Daarji's books. The most mystifying were the ones in Urdu and in Persian.

*Do you know how Daarji writes?* He asks us one afternoon.  
*Show us.*

He opens a blue box. It contains several sheets in Daarji's hand. Evidently his notes. We turn over the sheets, and around, to examine them from all angles. The script is crawling with ants, as it were.

*But this seems so simple, Jindu!*

*How?*

*You don't even have to draw a line over the words.*

*Do you know what it's called?*

*What is it?*

*It's Urdu.*

How the hell would we know!

\*

*Dear Daarji,*

*We're all fine here. We pray to God for your health and happiness. Further, this is to say that...*

An inland letter had arrived from Bua yesterday, addressed to Daarji, more than half of it blank. It's in this blank space that I'm setting down my own ants. Squiggles – our 'Urdu', which Daarji will have to read... I write even as Happy and Dicky dictate.

*I close with love to the children.*

By now we seem to have lost sight of the fact that it's not Bua but we, the three of us, who are writing this letter. We ask the maid for a little dough to seal it. We do not know one needs to put down the address as well – but that Bua had already done. We take our letter to post it in the red letter-box at noontime. There are fat cows lolling there. Happy is the bravest of us. She goes ahead and drops it into the box. *Let's put in these also.* We 'post' the stones too that we'd picked up to protect ourselves in case the cows got ideas. Now our letter will be safe from the cows.

The next day we wait with bated breath for Daarji to open letter-

box. The postman comes around one every day, and Daarji collects his mail soon after.

Daarji takes the letter to his bed. That's where he likes to read his mail – stretched out. Our heads against his on the pillow, we eye the letter in his hands. Usually, if it's a letter from Bua, we ask him to read it out loud. But he skips entire passages. He knows what we want to hear. *It says, love to all children.*

*Why don't you read it carefully, Daarji? See if it doesn't have something more to say.*

A smile breaks out on his lips. *Oh yes, it says here: Love to Dolly, love to Happy.* Dicky is a hot-tempered girl. He steals a glance at her. *Kiss Dicky on her forehead for me.*

We're all satisfied. This is all there is to letters insofar as we are concerned.

Today, with our letter in his hands, he bursts out laughing. He runs his eyes down it, as if he were reading it. We crane our necks to watch him.

*You wrote this letter, didn't you?*

*We didn't. We deny it outright. It's from Bua.*

*It isn't from Bua, it's from you.*

*No, not at all.*

Silence.

*Anyway, read it to us.*

What was there for him to read, though?

*Look, it says: We're all fine here, and we pray to God for your health and happiness...*

Our small fingers move over the squiggles on the blue paper. He encourages us to 'read'. We know it all by heart. *It ends with: Give my love to the children.*

He gives us a broad, lingering beam. What is he thinking?

\*

So I'll write to you – in a script all my own. I'm sure, though, that you'll be able to decipher every bit of it. That which is set down and that which I could not.

Some days ago I read a story in a children's magazine. In it, a girl sends to her father abroad a letter secured to the claws of a pigeon. The pigeon dies, hit by a stray stone, but not before it has taken the letter to father. As he unties the letter he sees on it the pigeon's blood... A picture showing this appeared alongside the story.

My memory of your travels in distant lands is linked, to this day, with this story, this letter.

\*

I never see you in my dreams.<sup>2</sup>

Your absence has an air of solidity, of finality, about it such that I see you nowhere. Not a trace in any man on the street, or in a photograph, or a film... But, yes, when I first see a photo of Tagore, instantly I am taken in. There is something in the photo that reminds me of you. After I read his *Kabuliwalla*, he has become, in a way, my other Daarji. Now I have not one but two Daarjis. And both are absent, nowhere to be seen... Only one's father is one's own. No one can replace him, not even in one's thoughts - I will learn this years later.

It seems years have passed since. At first, they were just some months, but as the wound of separation turned blue, months became years and years an unending barren span of time. Now when I look back, there are no seasons in my childhood: no winter, no summer; neither autumn nor the rains. Only an endless time, an eternity - and you forever are pounding in my heart.

Were you just a sum of but a few incidents, but a few images, spanning across a vast desert?

Why don't I remember Ma the same way? In split memories of episodes? Surely, she was around. I must have taken her presence for granted, and my happiness as everlasting.

How strange that in all my dreams of childhood it is Ma I see again and again. Dead or murdered... I wake up with a start, crying. Orphan of my dream, in my dream. My grief does not go even as I burrow in her lap.

Is this a pointer that would define my sense of orphanhood? A lifetime later, I'll look back on these days - a period eclipsed by the

shadow planet Rahu. The duo of Rahu and Ketu will come and take over the parents' house for full eighteen years in my horoscope. Their presence will edge us out - you, me, Mother... to walk the earth alone, caught up in the wheels of Time.

\*

Suddenly things will change. Everything will. Kartar Chacha, stuck in the door of his own car in a highway collision, will die. You're away in Iran. Granny is crazed with grief. Ma is eight months along; she cannot travel to her. Everything is falling apart. In the midst of all this turmoil the little one has arrived - Rabbi, our brother of four sisters.

*He arrived on the fortieth day after Kartar was gone. A telegram brought me his, not Gyani's, news. Even as I was in mourning I took, with this very mouth of mine, the first bite of sweets in forty days...* Granny tells us.

This is amazing. How one forgets in order to survive.

\*

Granny, however, will forget nothing. Alone in her haveli, she'll grieve, now sobbing soundlessly, now keening aloud. She'll cry day and night until one day she is blind. Not a thing to see except a dead son in the shadows. She'll be rushed to a doctor, but in vain. She is no longer the woman who once ruled her estate like a man. This is someone else. Her own ghost. Come to haunt her own haveli. Talking to her dead son...

We'll not even know that Granny is already underlining another of our family trait. *We will not be the people who forget. We will be trapped in our memories.* This is what will mark us from the rest of our clan.

Ever since Bua has found the footprint of a sparrow under her kneading plate, she has been looking for Chacha among the birds. Chacha had come to her in her dream one night and told her: *I'll remain a bird for three months, and then come back in human form.*

\*

Daarji is back. But he is not the one I'd known.

He is somebody else. Preoccupied. The day the ice of his grief thaws, he'll be a father again, full of gusto. A father not to me, but to my

baby brother. He is not his former self. As if there are two of him now. One who is Daarji to us three sisters, another who pampers Rabbi and Picku. The three of us are grown up. Impishness will not become us.

I don't know yet it already hurts. One day it will come to the fore when I will see Rabbi weeping. After Daarji is gone.

*Rabbi, when you were born, Daarji stopped being mine. I'm not sure whether you snatched him from me or what. He'd love you so much... When I saw him about the house, my heart would sink. He didn't love me as before. He'd moved away from me. Now, when he is no more, it feels he is gone a second time...*

I'm crying. Rabbi is crying. Daarji is laid out on a slab of ice. We've stopped by the roadside. Who am I weeping for? The girl, whose father would go away in her childhood, is nowhere now. Why, and for whom, these copious tears?

Old hurts are like this. They can make you cry. Any day, anywhere.

\*

I'm the eldest child, and timid. I do not go out to play. The children can easily rough me up. In that case, my younger sisters have to come to my rescue. Picku tells me I am a Slow Speed News Bulletin. I've not played for years now. I'm happy baby-sitting.

I keep to my corner of the park with my book of folk tales. My youngest sister and my brother are with me. I don't call them 'sister' or 'brother', though; I call them 'children'. Whenever I do that, they distance themselves from me some more. I do not know about this yet. Some day, I will...when none of us is a child any longer. I'm a big girl; I feel responsible. Mummy, too, harps on it: *Look, you're a big girl now.* I – their big sister, their mother, their ayah. The maid has quit. But I'm here, ain't I? I'll take care of everything....

I'm safe here – among my books. The school librarian lets me borrow two books in a week instead of the usual one. Then there's the municipality library. I've books at home also. I'm a fast reader – and why not? There's no TV yet. Had I had no books, my childhood would be a stretch of emptiness....

*Listen, Deep! Why do you call her Pothi-Pothi? (A pothi is a book.)*

Years later, our maid would ask Mamoo, my visiting uncle, the same question. He has come down from Canada to be with us for a few days.

*When she was small, Mamoo tells her, she would read the whole day. Pothi after pothi. So I gave her this nickname.*

I, your daughter. When you were away, I was a book among your books.

I'm still there.

*And you?*

Are you there in those words in those books?

No! There's ink in them, they've shape, sound, meaning. We can see them, hear them, grasp them.

You've gone beyond all these.

## Four

*We're on way to bring you home.*

Who would have thought one day we'd set out for you like a file of ants?

*We're on way to bring you home.*

It's day 2 of dark half of Ashad (June the 30th). It's terribly hot. You're lying at your ancestors' doorsteps.

*We're on way to bring you home.*

You flew away, at eight-thirty this morning, on your swan wings.

*What was I doing then? The usual. Pottering about the house as on most mornings. No shadow hung over my heart, no call rang in my ears. No disquiet. No hunch that you'd packed your bags that you were already on your way that you had not left a word for us before departing.*

Did you know your time was up?

*We're on way to bring you home.*

Jas-bhai informed us on phone. *He complained of chest pain*

*his morning. It didn't occur to anyone it was a heart attack. He'd no previous history. As soon as we suspected it, we took him to hospital. His condition had deteriorated by then. The doctor gave him an injection direct into the heart, and said: If he can last five minutes, he'll live... He opened his eyes immediately after the shot. He shook his head. Within two minutes he had another attack. It was all over, then and there, right on the examining table.*

*All over?*

*All over?*

*Did he say nothing? Did he try to?*

*No.*

*Asked for no one?*

*No.*

*No one?*

*None.*

*Nothing in his eyes either?*

*There was pain.*

*Did he know he was going?*

*Not at first. Not until he opened his eyes following the injection.*

*Then he shook his head in the negative, he knew.*

*Didn't he ask for anyone? Didn't he leave a word for anyone?*

*Had he nothing to say?*

*We will never know. The head of a large household. Bound to all by threads of love.... Didn't you pause at all? Not even a moment? Just to look back once? Was it a vow, never to look back? What tenacity! All alone on your last journey. Empty handed. Not a single one by your side.*

\*

*None of us was with him. His dead ancestors were. And their soil, Grandfather's last resting-place, Chacha's ashes. They say when one's time is up the ancestors arrive to bear away the soul in their arms as we do the newborn. Who knows?*

*But it's true that when his end drew near he found himself back at his ancestral place, even though there was nothing there, nothing*

*much left even of the haveli.... He used to say to us: When I die, take my mortal remains to our village.*

*Who do you want to go to there, Daarji?*

*All your life, you didn't once look back. So what's it now?*

*It was time to go. Is that why?*

*As if he must go all the way around in his orbit before passing on.... Come full circle.*

\*

*Did he say nothing?*

*No.*

*Did he say nothing?*

*No! I told you!*

*Nothing?*

*Well, I recall that when we were taking him into the jeep to go to hospital, he opened his eyes.*

*Then?*

*He said: Yaar, don't take me there. They'll muck me up.*

*He must have been afraid of the razor. Of body hair being shaved for surgery. Of violation of the obligations enjoined on a true Sikh.*

*What was he doing when he had the pain?*

*He was at his Morning Prayers. He got up only after he'd finished. Said: Jas, I feel a pain.*

*Then?*

*We gave him a painkiller with his tea. He threw up.*

*Then?*

*We'd to go someplace. He asked us to get ready a little early. He slipped one arm into his kurta sleeve, the other he couldn't raise, and lay down. We took him to hospital the way he was. At once.*

*Did he say anything? No. Did he say anything? No. Did he say anything? No. Did he say anything? No. Did he say anything? No. Did he say anything? No. Did he say anything? Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.*

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.  
Nothing. Nothing.

*Dicky, did you have any premonition this morning?*

*No.*

*Did you, Happy?*

*No.*

*Rabbi?*

*No.*

*Picku?*

*No.*

How could the bell have rung if he didn't dial a number?

Did he say anything? No. Did he say anything? No. Did he say anything? No. Did he say anything? No. Did he say anything? No. Did he say anything? No. Did he say anything? No. Did he say anything? Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

*Did no one have a sinking sensation?*

*I'd been feeling low since the morning, says Ma. What's the matter?*

*I asked myself. Why should I be feeling low these past few days? At eleven, then, there was this call from Jas in Amritsar. How was I to know...*

\*

*What will you do about it if I die? Other than weep some?*

You tease Picku. She is all set to leave for Chicago, perhaps for good.

*If I die, what will you do except weep? And how long can one weep?*

Picku knows you're soft-hearted, and a jellyfish. Your moment of weakness leaves her embarrassed. She pretends to be strong in your presence but breaks down when alone...

No one says anything any more. Eight years ago, Kanu left us behind dumb. We're still alive without her.

\*

Picku is coming after two years. All the way from across the seven seas. Let's say our goodbyes. Who knows when, in what way, will we meet again?

We're hurrying along by road, she by air.

*We're on way to bring you home.*

\*

That's the spot for water – there in our throats. Where it prickles...

When there's no throat, where does one feel thirst?

When there's no throat, how do our dead ancestors drink the water we offer them?

By their eyes? The cupped hand?

But they have no body, no parts.

You'd know, though, won't you, that we've brought you water?

From now on, Rabbi will be making you the offerings of water. Drink well, in large gulps. Like you'd have us drink in our childhood. Right?

Lest we, your little goddesses, should see you thirsty...

\*

You're sleeping, both your arms in your kurta sleeves, the front unbuttoned. If I move your flowing beard sideways, my hand will be where your heart is beneath your vest.

*Was it here the doctor put the needle in, Daarji? This morning?*

You never came along to get us our shots. You sent the nanny instead. You'd wait round the corner. Yet, our screams reached you, stabbing your heart. At night then you'd keep watch by our bedside. Night after tearful night. Until the puncture had healed or the swelling subsided.

*Was it in here, Daarji, that the doctor put the needle through to your heart?*

How you sleep! So peaceful, as if you have no idea how much was left unsaid between us. A last faint smile. Are you teasing us as you did in our childhood? You'd interrupt a story halfway. We would tickle

you for fear of ghosts. *Finish the story, please!*

I bend low to have a closer look. From every angle. You're nowhere. Is it a practical joke? Don't you know pranks can kill?

I feel you with my fingers.

We all do. All your children. Standing round your string-bed. In case you escape, if you're still here.

We're groping death. She isn't here. She bore you away a long time ago.

Why are your hands still tightly closed? Doesn't Death unclench all fists?

*He took his merits along with him. Mostly, the merits are all used up in life in undoing one's sins. It's a rare one who carries his good deeds along... A seer, who calls at our house, will tell us.*

*We are here to take you home with us.*

Where you lie now, you belong to neither the gods nor the world. You are only ours.

\*

*"I". Who is there in this body that is "I"? This is a hand, this a foot; this is the forehead, this the mouth? Which is "I"?*

Lunch-hour, years ago. Ma and you, at the dining table, are discussing the Upanishads.

*Who is "I", Daarji?*

Did you have to go just now? Only last week we'd a talk on phone, and I told you, exultantly: *Daarji, I've picked up some Sanskrit. There was a summer camp for children in our neighbourhood on how to converse in Sanskrit. I attended it. They say that the Sanskrit of the Bhagavad-Gita is the easiest to start on. You'll read it with me, won't you?*

*First of all, we'll need to determine how much Sanskrit you've picked up.*

*Well, you can set me a test! Tell me, how long wil it take us to go through the Bhagavad-Gita.*

*A week at the least.*

*Right! I'll be there next week. I'm done here for now.*

Done, are we? Who knew we didn't have even a week left to us? I was not destined to savour your knowledge. Otherwise, why would it take so many years to bring my book to you?

What did I learn all this while? Nothing. It was all trash. All these precious years were taken up in just de-schooling myself.

\*

*Come on, let's get going.*

*It's two-thirty in the night.*

We take your leave, Grandpa. We take your leave, Chacha. Daarji had come to meet you. Now we are taking him with us. He has a home back there, waiting for him.

\*

*A year after I'd made my father his last resting-place the way he wanted it, having applied salt to his body before placing it in a coffin, sitting up, buried in our field, the one that had a well, he came to me in my dream, and said: The roof is not good enough to keep out the rain... I was upset that father was unhappy. I had the structure made all over again, with bricks and cement, and laid a leak-proof roof. He did not appear in my dreams thereafter... our Chacha had once told us.*

When Grandfather was to die he went to his father's well. When Daarji's time was up he went back to his village.

\*

That well – our great-grandfather Sardar Sundar Singh had had it sunk for thirsty wayfarers. Having wells dug was considered such a meritorious deed those days. A landed aristocrat, he also worked as a thanedar – a police officer – for the British. They say, he was a handsome man such that birds in flight would pause for a peep at him. He died a terrible death in youth. *He was bewitched...* Grandmother told us.

*How come?*

*You can say he went out of his head... a married man with a*

family. Your grandfather must have been a year old then. He went around saying he saw Karmo everywhere he looked.

Who was Karmo?

His own brother's wife. Ever heard of such a thing?

What did Karmo look like?

So beautiful a glance could soil her.

Why was she suspected of indulging in witchcraft?

She'd borne no children.

And what was her husband like?

As black as soot.

And Sundar Singh's wife?

Plain, ordinary-looking.

They all lived together in the same house?

They did. But, later on, the two families split.

Then?

Your great-grandfather didn't live long then – perhaps, a year and a half or so. He was in such bad shape. In spite of all treatment, including visits to exorcists, visions of Karmo didn't cease to occur to him. Besides, both his job and jagirdari were in a shambles. One day he died even as the evil spirit was being cast out. Poor thing! Your grandfather was then two and a half...

Such a big estate and the only heir a mere two years and a half.... Surely, a shadow eclipsed our house.

And Karmo... what became of her?

She was utterly disgraced. A year later her husband too passed away. Life was particularly difficult for her thereafter.

How long did she live?

She was a sinner. She couldn't have died an easy death. She died an old, demented woman.

Did you see her? Ever?

Of course! We attended on her in her last days. After all, your grandfather was her nephew.

Granny, they might have been in love.

Come on! You might call it love in the cities. Back there, in the villages, it's called wicked spell... a spell of black magic.

So! That perhaps is why Grandfather gave himself up to his wanderings. His father's death at a young age must not have let go of him, especially with Karmo around. It was good for him that he renounced the world and became a sanyasi. If not, he could have gone mad – or even hanged himself. Maybe, all along, he'd wanted to do just that but couldn't. Maybe, something of this had rubbed off on Daarji, his son...

For wouldn't Daarji go lie in a grave as a child when he was cross with his mother?

Granny would take along some village women to search for you. They would go to the Maulvi's, to the Pandit's, to the well... No sign of you anywhere. Then someone would suggest: *Let's go look up the cemetery.* Granny would spot you from a distance. You'd be lying in a grave you'd dug yourself. Buried up to your neck, face above the clods of earth... just so you could breathe? Granny would whisper to her friends: *Don't look at him; let him be.* When you saw them passing by, you'd call out in a thin voice: *I'm here, Mamma!*

*Oh my! Death to me! What's my darling boy doing here?* She'd make a dash, pull you out, and take you home in her arms.

Once I asked Daarji about his childhood penchant for graves. He was abashed.

*And, pray, where were you then?*

*You tell me!*

*You were up there on the ledge of the roof – a sparrow. Watching the little me...*

How true! Yes! This certainly is true!

\*

*Are you comfortable now, Grandpa? Rain doesn't bother you any more?*

I do not know where his last resting-place is in these fields stretching away in the darkness. Anyway, he might have already risen and gone home.

How long does the spirit hang about the grave? I must ask a wise man.

*Are you there, Grandpa? May we take Daarji home?*

\*

We're passing through Amritsar, through Daarji's childhood streets.

The Sattowalli Gully is on the other side of the Darbar Sahib. At its back. That's where Ameer Singh-ji had his dwelling-place. All his disciples, including Daarji, wore the robes of the celibate. Daarji was around fourteen then. He stayed with Guru-ji for three years. Even when he had cast away his robes, his soul remained a fakir's, of a wandering monk's.

Sons of landed gentry came here from far-off places to study. How, in those days, the fathers wished their sons to be scholars of Sanskrit, of Arabic, of Persian. When Daarji dedicated his first book to his father and to Guru-ji, this must have weighed with him.

And today, what do they aspire to?

We're told that once, when Daarji was small, he had painful eyes. Sant Ameer Singh-ji treated him for his condition. The disciples used to be looked after like one's own children. Besides the Vedas, Guru-ji was also well versed in the traditional Ayurvedic system of medicine. He collected plants and roots with healing qualities and ground them himself... There was no electricity those days. In the light of a clay oil-lamp, he, inadvertently, put snake oil in Daarji's eyes. Only when Daarji cried out did he realize his mistake. But what to do now? He tried hard to undo the harm by using several antidotes but nothing worked.

My poor fifteen-year-old Daarji, without a hint of down on his upper lip yet, was already close to his death... He was certain to go blind.

Ameer Singh-ji put his faith to the test. He conducted weeklong ritual recitations of the holy Granth, considered as efficacious as the Mrityunjay chant. In accordance with the prescribed procedure, a curtain is hung between the Granth and the sickbed. Skilled readers take turns at recitation. The purity of pronunciation is of paramount importance. The reading is intended only for the ears of the sick.

The recitation saved my Daarji, my little Daarji, but his eyes, once so beautiful, were bloodshot for life. Like Lord Shiva's – inebriated. Daarji was called Shiva, anyway!

\*

*Shall we take him to the Darbar Sahib for his last obeisance?*

It's *amrit vela*, the sacred hour, in the narrow winding streets of Amritsar. A blessed soul, he has, on his last journey, brought us all here in the serene wee hours. The world yearns for these moments at the Darbar Sahib.

*Come on, Daarji! Don't you want to make your obeisance?*

You're coming along, aren't you? You're not still lying there on the slab of ice in the van, are you? Rabbi, please call him. They say the soul can still hear you. It's just that it cannot find its way about. Therefore, say the wise, we need to call out to it, and it will follow.

*Come on, Daarji, let's make our bow.*

There is no question of your not coming along. Whenever you brought us here in the past, you'd insist first thing on our going in to Golden Temple– 'to have our presence marked'.

What does the Guru Granth Sahib ordain for us today? Hail Guru Ram Das<sup>11</sup>! Kindly mark our Daarji's last attendance.

*Hoi nimana dhah paya*

The meek, the selfless, who submit,

Shall by Him be conferred grace...

A hymn from the predawn prayer is being sung. This is the Guru's message, then. So, Daarji, you lay yourself down in humility when the end came? The Guru is promising you'll be honoured in God's abode. Are you listening, Daarji?

You must be, for, at such a time, the soul listens all.

*Now come, let's go home.*

\*

One's own father is never a corpse...

To the last, his face, his hands, his body, continue to look like our own... our own flesh and blood. As if death had made him our child. During the course of the journey, as the body on the slab of ice in the ambulance lurches, our hand at once goes out to him. *May he sleep,*



*undisturbed.* If a leg splays out, we like to put it back in place. *Lest death stiffen it.* We tuck the blanket under him even though there is ice underneath. *Didn't he draw covers over us when we were small?*

Asleep. That's how father will stay in your mind's eye all your life, to the other end of memory...through eternity.

Should a parent die the navel cord needs to be cut a second time, this time by the offspring, the way the parents had done at its birth a long time ago... Only this time the knife is rusted, and there is no help at hand. You have to rise all by yourself, slowly, from the clotted mass of blood, only with the dead ancestors looking on from a dark corner.

And so we emerge one day in this cruel world, aged and old before our time.

\*

Have a good look. Go around the house, kitchen, toilettes and all. Here we are, your children. These are your books in the almirahs. This is your study table. This blue box contains notes in your hand. These are your clothes; the saffron scarves you'd wrap round your head; vests; towels. Still smelling of you...a smell I've known as a child and can recognize with my eyes closed. Can I have some of these, please?

Taken your bath, put on new clothes, have you? All the five K's<sup>12</sup> are in place. How handsome you look. It doesn't look like it's been thirty hours since...You let us bend your arms to wear new clothes. No stiffening in any limb. Why don't we wait for a while? Who knows you might have walked out of your body just for a stroll? Just in case you return to claim your body, what shall we do? Look at him! How radiant he looks! Happy to be going, aren't you?

*So! You won't say anything to us?*

*Let's go, if mum's the word.*

*Come, Daarji!*

You've filled the pitcher with water, have you, Rabi?

\*

*Then Karna said: O Krishna, grant me one last wish. Light my pyre where no cremation has taken place before.*

*So be it, said Krishna.*

*That moment Lord Krishna cast his divine eye about, and saw funeral pyres everywhere. There was not a single spot where a corpse had not been burnt sometime or other. What should he do now? He made Karna a pyre on his left palm. His right he had already corrupted when he begged for alms in an earlier incarnation as Vaman...So this is how Karna attained his liberation.*

Daarji, where do we get you Sri Krishna's palm?

\*

*Burn him not, scorch him not*

*O Fire!*

*Destroy not all of him, cause him no pain*

*Crumble not his skin, nor his body*

*When at last you have prepared him*

*O Fire-god*

*Send him to our dead ancestors*

*In the world of the manes*

*He will serve well*

*The gods.*

*May your eyes go to the sun*

*Your soul to the wind!*

*Go to paradise or to the nether world*

*In accordance with your deeds.*

*Go to the water*

*If that is convenient*

*Go to the trees*

*If that is what you want.*

*To the unborn, the eternal*

*In him, O Fire*

*Lend your warmth;*

*Let your heat, your flames*

*Consume the rest.*

*O Fire-god*

*Be gentle  
Bear him away ever so gently  
To the realm of the manes...*

\*

We've collected your ashes, picked your charred bones. We didn't find, though, the one on which Mother Fate scribbles her hieroglyph.

The Pandit was a novice. Last time when we'd brought Granny's ashes, he stuck a bone in our palms. *Here*, he said, *look at Fate's secret writing. No one has ever been able to decipher it.*

We held the bone in our hands in turn. We could only stare at it. You too looked long at it, remember?

*Daarji, can you make anything of it?*

You pressed the bone into my hand wordlessly, and withdrew. It could be that you'd understood, even if not completely – and did not want to tell us. You were that sort.... Over half our lives we've spent making sense of your silence. And this morning, we didn't get to see your fate-bone at all. We would not be surprised if you'd yourself scratched out the cryptic characters. After all, it was you who stayed here alone on the pyre the whole night long. We were at home then.

Who knows what you did, or was done to you, in our absence?

\*

*Shall we go home?*

The Pandit demurs: *Hang his ashes from the hook over there. Once you've brought someone here, you can't take him home. There are others too.*

Let them be. We don't care. As Sikhs, we have our own beliefs. Daarji is going to his own house. He had it built under his own supervision. He can come and go in his house. Not just this house, but we, his children, too, are his dwelling-places. Aren't we? For sure, his soul still lingers in the atmosphere. He must be waiting for his youngest girl to arrive. She is already on her way. From afar.

*Shall we go, Daarji?*

Picku is expected to reach by tomorrow night. We can leave for Haridwar soon after. You were in such a hurry to go to Haridwar, weren't

you? Last year when you took Granny there, you told Rabbi: *I also wish to be brought here.*

*Why here? Why not to Kiratpur Sahib?* says Rabbi.

*Because that came up only the other day. This has been the place for our family for last four hundred years... And when you come, do have my name put down in the Pandit's records.*

For now, though, let's go home, Daarji. But first make your bow at Majnu ka Teela<sup>13</sup>, your Baba Nanak's place – lest Baba should say later I didn't bring you to him.

*Shall we go then?*

The bag of your ashes in my hand, I look, in the hymn being sung, for some sign from the gods. The hymn goes on:

*Nanak ghar a baithiya*

He sits around at Home,

Saith Nanak, he speaks not...<sup>14</sup>

So, Daarji, you're sitting around, not speaking, in Nanak's house. All right, don't speak; it's now between you and your Baba.

\*

We sang you Kabir's songs the whole afternoon. You used to loosen yourself in his verse. Later, Bhai Baldip Singh played you some mridang drum.

*The last time I was here I played some uncommon beats for Daarji: one regular beat and a half... Now listen to this. This has a repeating metre of fifteen beats. This one is a five-beat pattern. And this one – well, this is the seventeen-beat Shikhar Taal. Daarji was deeply into music. He was particularly pleased when I played some half beats, and said: Yaar, you must visit here more often... We were making a film on him. We'd canned some forty-five minutes of it. Now we'll need to make best of it.*

You like this music, Daarji? Baldip is playing for you one last time. Was this the way the mridang was played in your Guru's house, these the unique musical metres the hymns would be rendered in? You

once played it to us when we were small. You took it from Mamoo who was helping us practice our lessons. Remember?

\*

*Where is Daarji?*

Picku has arrived. I point out the urn to Picku.

*No, Picku, don't cry. It'll mess up his journey. Uncle Gurnam Singh says he was a brahm-gyani: he had experienced the mystic truth. We must not cry. You know we had mridang played for him the whole afternoon? Right now, he must be so happy. Don't you cry, Picku.*

'We didn't even get to see him one last time! We'd never know, Uncle, what went on in his heart in those last moments.'

'It's as well that none of you was with him. You would have only made it worse for him to pass on. With all of you around, he'd have found it difficult to go. Pray for your father. Make his progress smooth.'

*Take out the prayer book, Picku. Don't cry. There would be enough time for all that grieving... a whole lifetime.*

\*

*Daarji, my Daarji! My little Daarji!*

I stroke the bag in my hand. He is in there. We're going to Haridwar.

Once upon a time, not long ago, he too had stroked me – the bundle that I was. Much the same way. He would take me along to have my bone set. Now I'm taking his bones and ashes to Ma Ganga for immersion. I'd slipped, though, a half burnt tooth in my purse. My little relic. I thought I'd keep it with me always, but it is already reduced to powder. I took a peek at it on the way: it was already part ashes, part a bone beyond recognition. Perhaps Ma Ganga wants this as well. She wants the whole of him. All right, Ma. Take him all.

But still a part of him will stay – in my face, in my features. How will you steal that, Ma?

\*

*Garab karat hai deh kau*

Why take pride in this body

It will perish in a moment, O Friend!

Like a bubble of water

Like a wall of sand...<sup>15</sup>

The ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, said these verses in his last days before he was martyred.

Was, then, his head, a father's head, a bubble? A Sikh in disguise had snatched it in the middle of turmoil and brought it to his young son Gobind.

All that love in the heart of that child, Guru Gobind, that will start the tradition of unshorn hair for Sikhs<sup>16</sup> – was it a bubble, too?

*Were you a bubble, Daarji?*

*No! No!*

The pouch moves.

\*

*How's Sardar-ji?*

Our family Pandit asks after him as we approach.

Last year, it had taken us a long time to locate him. Daarji had not been to see him in thirty eight years – ever since Grandfather's ashes were brought over. When Kartar Chacha died, he was abroad. Rabbi had seen the Pandit's house when he accompanied Daarji with Granny's remains. It wasn't hard to locate him this time.

*It's him we've brought.*

Last year, Daarji had gone through the Pandit's records in old notebooks. All of our family tree was there, dating back to the sixteenth century – to a time before Dasondha Singh-ji's...

*Will you please make a copy of this? We will make an offering...* Daarji had told him.

On seeing us, the Pandit thinks we have come to collect the copy of our family tree.

\*

Sardar Dasondha Singh-ji – our forefather. He finds a mention in Bhai Kahan Singh's *Encyclopaedia of the Sikhs*. He was chief of one of the twelve Sikh *mils* (militia) that sprang up to take on the Mughals after Guru Gobind Singh's death.

It is said that the militia with the Nishan Sahib standard (the Sikh ensign that flutters atop tall flagpoles outside the gurdwaras) were so brave that the enemy took to its heels at their sight. The *misl* had its residential quarters – called *jhanda bunga* – at the main entrance to the sacred pool round the Harimandir Sahib. All the twelve militia bands were lodged around the walkway, but the one with the Nishan Sahib standard, being somewhat special, had the pride of place.... After 1984 Blue Star, it is the only *bunga* that survived; all the others are gone.

When the militia returned from an expedition, the men tied their horses to the *lachi ber* (the Indian plum) tree by the side of the sacred pool, bathed, and then went in to the Darbar Sahib to make their obeisance. Those days Harimandir Sahib was not so opulent, nor was the plum tree by the poolside held in such reverence. (Daarji, we'll have the reading of the Granth at your *shraddha* – the annual prayers for the dead – at this very site, in your true home, in the house of Gurus.)

Dasondha Singh-ji, our warrior forefather – what must he have looked like? It is possible, isn't it, that someone of us still has his nose or his eyes or something. He would wear iron armour and wield heavy weapons, like the ones on show at the museum. And we, his descendants – we're but half-pints, pygmies, with hearts of a sparrow...

\*

I read the names in the family tree, from bottom upwards – Basant Kaur; Kartar Singh; Sadhu Singh; Karmo; Sundar Singh...

Was it Grandfather who brought Karmo's remains? The remains of the woman who died crazed by separation from his dead father. How many years did that barren sorceress take dying?

And Grandfather? He betook himself to the outhouse in the fields with a well, four days before he was to die. He'd just come back from a pilgrimage. At home, Bua's wedding was on. As soon as he walked in he announced: *I'll be gone in three days.*

The children laughed. 'Look, he has already picked a quarrel with Mother. Not only that, but he says he is going!' (Daarji was in Delhi with us. I was ten months old then.) On the fourth day, Granny had a sinking feeling since morning. Afraid her husband may really be going,

she asked Chacha to find out. Grandfather was already gone – with no one of the family by his side.

Great-grandpa too must have been all alone. He died while being exorcised of the black magic.... Who is more alone than the one dying in love?

And now Daarji – he went to his childhood village as if called by the ancestors. How else could he have found time in his busy life in Delhi to make this visit?

What is this curse of dying all alone?

\*

I don't know why the Pandit is taking so long to understand it. He asks again: *Where's Sardar-ji?*

*We just told you it's him we've brought...* Sometimes Rabbi speaks as softly as Daarji.

This time the Pandit takes us in, one by one, closely – four daughters and one son. Suddenly it dawns on him. As if he were seeing our faces for the first time, orphan faces.

*Who is the eldest?*

I step forward.

He doesn't speak for a while.

*This was no age to go.*

We know.

He stares vacantly through the door. He is my age – a Brahmin who keeps records of people's deaths. His ancestors must have seen my ancestors, written down their names...

*Let me put it down here. What did you say the name was?*

*Gyani Jagir Singh.*

The word *Gyani* lumps up in my throat. With what love Granny would call him *Gyani*, the wise one. Her voice would quiver with emotion. She wouldn't call him often by this name. Only when he came in from the sun, carrying tote bags full of vegetables and fruit in both his hands, past her, she would know who it is, she would call... *Gyani!*

Daarji would recognize that quiver in her voice. Embarrassed he would linger, not respond.

*What is it?*

*Come here, will you?*

He would go bashfully to her. Granny would draw him close. A tender hug.

*Here comes my Gyani! Was it too hot out there?*

*Hmn! What's it?*

*Come, let me kiss your beard!*

She, his blind mother, would gather his white beard in her hands.

We would come out of our rooms watching.

She would touch his beard to her eyes, then to her lips. If she heard anyone of us titter, she would turn round in that direction.

*What are you girls doing here? Go, go away! This is between a mother and her son. Your Daar (her tongue refused to say 'ji' to her own son) didn't grow up just like that – I had to bring him up, inch by inch, kissing his whiskers. But for it, he would still be a rag of his mother...*

Go, Daarji. Go to your mother. Now, stay with her on the same page. Some day one or the other of us will come and join you here.

*Daarji, were you a scrap of Granny's rag?*

*Pray, were you watching me?*

*Of course, I was!*

*From where?*

*From the rooftop of the haveli. It was a long time ago. I was a sparrow then, remember?*

## Translator's Notes

An attempt has been made to explain the Hindi/Punjabi words where they occur for the first time in the text. At places, however, footnotes could not have been avoided. On second thoughts, I have moved these "footnotes" to the end.

<sup>1</sup> Guru Gobind Singh wanted his baptized Sikhs to defend their faith with arms as well as to preach it. With this in view, he sent a group to Benaras, then the seat of learning, to study the Vedas. The Brahmin teachers, however, turned them away, saying that such scholarship was

not meant for those who carried weapons. The Guru, then, sent them back attired in the sadhu's ochre robes. The descendants of these people in time came to be known as *Nirmalé* – the pious, the pure. The followers of this sect are essentially religious scholars.

<sup>2</sup> Karna was a son of Kunti, mother of the Pandavas, by Sun-god. He, of warrior class, trained in arms under the fiery Brahmin Parashurama under a fake identity. When Parshurama discovered the ruse he pronounced a curse on him that he would unlearn his skill with arms right at the moment when he would need it the most in battle.

<sup>3</sup> Kabir (AD 1380-1460) was a pre-Nanak saint-poet. The Granth is an eclectic scripture. It contains works of not only the Sikh Gurus but also of Hindu sages and of Muslim divines. Even the low-caste saint-poets of the religious revival movement found a place in the Granth. Kabir with his 541 contributions is the most extensively represented.

<sup>4</sup> *thé* and *té* are variant forms of auxiliary verb indicative of past tense. The father of the protagonist is putting his daughter through her scriptural paces.

<sup>5</sup> *Baba* is a title of address for the elderly and the wise. The obvious reference here is to the death of a yogi from whom Kabir learned the technique of the Hath Yoga. Metaphorically, it refers to the Self, the Doer: the body is but the agent.

<sup>6</sup> Guru Gobind Singh had four sons. Ajit Singh (15) and Jujhar Singh (13) died in a battle at Chamkaur. The younger two were captured and bricked alive, on 12 December 1705, in a wall by the Governor of Sirhind when the children refused to embrace Islam.

<sup>7</sup> The Sangam in Allahabad is the point of confluence of the Ganges, the Jamuna, and the subterranean Saraswati.

<sup>8</sup> The epic war of Mahabharata was fought between first cousins – the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Bhishma was the elder brother of their grandfather.

<sup>9</sup> The Sisganj gurdwara in Chandni Chowk, Delhi, is built at the site of the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur. He was beheaded, on orders of Emperor Aurangzeb, on 11 November 1675. Literally, it is the place where the *sis* (the head) fell.

<sup>10</sup> To the Sikhs, their Holy Book is the living voice of their Gurus. Just before his death in AD 1708, Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, declared as closed the line of succession of human gurus, and asked the Sikhs henceforth to revere the Granth as the symbolic representative of all the ten Gurus.

<sup>11</sup> Guru Ram Das (AD 1534-1581) was the fourth Guru. He acquired the land to build the Sikh temple Harimandir on it and also founded the city of Amritsar.

<sup>12</sup> Five K's: *kesh* (unshorn hair), *kangha* (comb worn in the hair), *kachha* (a pair of baggy drawers), *kara* (a steel bracelet on the right wrist), and *kirpan* (sword).

<sup>13</sup> A gurdwara on the periphery of Delhi.

<sup>14</sup> The soul is back home where it belongs with God. It has merged in Him. There is no use for words any more.

<sup>15</sup> These verses occur in Sloka Mehl 9 (compositions of the ninth Guru) incorporated in the Granth at its end. Actually, the first two of the four lines quoted here are taken from Verse 42, the third from Verse 25, and the fourth from Verse 49. The grouping of parts of these verses together suggests that the family stayed there at the gurdwara for quite some time.

<sup>16</sup> Guru Gobind Singh baptized the Sikhs at a function at Anandpur on the New Year Day in 1699 (29 March 1699) to give rise to a semi-military Khalsa fraternity. The five K's (*see above*) were enjoined on the Sikhs then.

Satyapal Anand

## A Brush with John Updike

Around 1985 when I took up a teaching position with the Southeastern University, Washington D.C., I was given an English course that had *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (2182 pages) as the students' textbook. I could choose my course material. Of living American poets, the ones I chose included John Updike. A year junior to me in age, he had given to the corpus of American poetry something that it lacked, namely religious fervor. A short piece of his that I came across was titled *I MISSED HIS BOOK BUT READ HIS NAME*. It seemed to have been written in a light mood and castigated a common name from South India. Mr. M. Anantanarayanan, a novelist had published his novel *The Silver Pilgrimage* and The New York Times had taken notice of it. John Updike dwelt jocularly upon the unpronounceable name in his poem. Here is the poem:

Though authors are a dreadful clan  
To be avoided if you can  
I'd like to meet the Indian, M. Anantanarayanan.  
I picture him as short and tan.  
We'd meet, perhaps, in Hindustan.  
I'd say, with admirable *élan*  
"Ah, Anantanarayanan.  
I have heard of you.  
The *Times* once ran  
A notice of your novel, an  
Unusual tale of God and Man."  
Would seat me on a lush divan  
And read his name – that sumptuous span  
Of "a"s and "n"s more lovely than  
"In Xanadu did Kubla Khan".