

Yours forever

Waryam Sandhu

The last rites had been performed. As per the custom, the turban of family responsibilities had been passed on to the head of the eldest son Amrik. With this, the little history of that poor man had come to an end, a history that was not going to be recorded in any chronicle. But his good and bad deeds were going to have a bearing on the lives of his little family in many ways in the coming days.

It was a dark night and everyone lay on his or her cot in the courtyard. An eerie silence reigned the darkness. Like scenes from a movie, different incidents and emotions connected to the dear departed were going through everyone's mind: sometimes smiling and laughing, sometimes cross; milking buffalos, chopping fodder, minding the cattle, feeding them, or ploughing the fields; mollifying and consoling children or beating them. With silent lips they were all going through the little verbal exchanges they had had with him. They felt he was not gone forever, he was still with them. He was still in that very house, sleeping on his cot just near them on the other side of the cattle. Dead drunk.

Amrik, who was a small government employee posted in a distant village, lay on his cot thinking about the last few days, the days that had followed him like an evil shadow ever since the death of his father, Kartar Singh. During these few days he had come to consider himself much older than he actually was; as if a young bull had been suddenly put under the yoke. As if a huge weight had been placed on his shoulders. He had never even imagined that such a thing could ever come to pass. He came to know about it only when his younger brother Mohinder had come to call him. Kartar Singh had perhaps consumed an overdose of some drug or maybe he had had a stroke. He was found lying unconsciousness when Amrik's mother Jagir Kaur went to him with his cup of tea early in the

morning. He was panting for breath. They called the local doctor. He advised them to take him to hospital in the city and they hired a taxi and took him there. And late in the evening the next day, Mohinder, Amrik and their mother brought Kartar Singh's dead body back to their village. The eldest daughter Banso had rushed back from her in-laws on learning about her father's illness. Her cries rent the skies when she came to know that her father's dead body had arrived. Crying madly, she came rushing and fell on the body, "O my dear father! Where have you gone leaving us ... grieving orphans! Without you, we have become aliens in this prospering village of yours..."

Everyone was wailing. Neighbours came... and they spent the whole night weeping for the dear departed. Early next morning the younger daughter too arrived from her in-laws. And when all the other relatives had reached, Kartar Singh was cremated. The head of the family was gone and what remained behind were consoling words of the people coming to pay their condolences.

"Amrik Sian! Don't lose heart. Whosoever is born dies... It is written in the scriptures. This world is like an inn... Even the big and the powerful have to go... people like Ravan who had Time tied to his bedpost. But if one goes when one is old enough you don't feel any resentment... He died because of his addictions... otherwise he was a young man... You cannot die with the dead... Now all the family responsibilities are on your shoulders... Be a man and carry on."

This realisation of the burden and the responsibility of having to look after the family had got him in a throttlehold like a python. The first feel of the snake he had when, merely a week after Kartar Singh's death, the Inspector of the society arrived in his jeep along with all his subordinates. After formally expressing his condolences, he took out his register and told him that his father owed the society sixteen hundred and fifty rupees. He had taken the amount as a loan for buying the fertilisers. The Inspector had told him: "According to the law, this money has to be deposited immediately after his death."

Amrik was at a loss to say anything. On being requested to give some time and concession, the Inspector relented and allowed him to pay in two instalments and granted him fifteen days to pay the first instalment. This concession was given as a favour, he said, only because Amrik was a fellow employee.

His younger brother Mohinder was not very dependable. He did not take much interest in agriculture nor in household tasks. The cattle suffered in the sun and he stood on the roof of Hazari Tunda's house. Shading his eyes with his hand, he would follow the pigeons flying in the sky. He was very rude with his father. There was little hope of Mohinder coming to his aid. He was not going to help him in sailing through these difficult times.... The youngest sister was only in the seventh. Amrik thanked God in his heart of hearts that Kartar Singh had at least married off the two elder girls, otherwise.... He breathed a deep sigh... Good or bad, addicted to drinking and opium.... but as long as his father had been alive, Amrik had no worries about the family. He simply gave half his salary to his mother every month and kept the other half for himself and that was all. With that money and whatever little they earned from farming, they were somehow able to pull through life.

Actually Amrik had never seriously tried to find out how the family survived. He was, in a way, allergic to his father's drinking and his addiction to opium. 'Do whatever you like; I don't care!' Such was his attitude, more or less. If he had not been so alienated from his father emotionally, maybe he could have talked to him, made him understand. Helped him get over his addictions. Then, he would not have crossed the limits, going beyond which had consumed him up. He found himself somewhat responsible for his father's death. Tears appeared in his eyes. He pressed down his eyelids and looked up again. With his gaze blurred with tears, the sky and the stars above appeared dim and hazy.

For the past many years, his relations with his father had been rather strained. They had hardly ever exchanged any words. He thought of many other families where father and sons had

friendly relationships. They laughed together, loved, talked to each other. He too could have done that.... but he had not been able to do anything and his father was gone... at such a young age. Forty-five is no age to die. He felt a deep wish rise in his heart. Oh God! May my father be alive again! I would love him so much, so much....

And he was lost in memories of childhood. His father, a young man with a short beard, took him to school to get him admitted. Master Mulkh Raj was affectionately patting Amrik on the back and saying, "Look at those boys! They are as young as you. Look, look at him! He is Khushia's son. He is smaller than you. Boys! Amrik's father has been my student and now his son Sardar Amrik Singh too is going to be my student." And after distributing *potasas* among the students, Master took a five-rupee note from his father as admission fee. And his father had smilingly remarked, "Don't teach him the way you taught us. You have destroyed our lives but don't leave his boat midstream, make him achieve something." And embarrassed, Mulkh Raj was giggling, "Behave son, behave! Behave yourself!" Amrik felt as if his father had deserted him midstream to fend for himself. He himself was standing on the other bank of the river and smiling at him. He had his brownish beard and small moustache. The young man who loved him so much at that time. The one who could defeat everyone in the long jump. Who, on finishing the jump, would be smiling: "Now we are burdened with family responsibilities. We can't jump any more. We old men..." And then patting six or seven year old Amrik on the back, he would tell him, "It is your time to jump now, son, in place of an old man like me." And for many years Amrik continued to wait for his father to grow old, for grey hair to appear in his beard! Whenever a teacher who had recently joined the school or any other stranger met him, he always asked Amrik, "Is he your elder brother?" Amrik didn't like a remark like that. Why didn't his father look like a father? Why did he look like a brother only? And he used to think that all fathers should have grey beards and should look mature.

And looking at his father attempting the long jump, some elder or the other would remark, “Son! You can afford to live like that. You have nothing to worry about. We’ll see when you have to shoulder the burden of your family responsibilities. Thank your father who keeps sending you money from Singapore.”

He had actually been enjoying himself on his father’s money. He kept himself completely free by leasing out his land and, wearing spotless clean clothes and pink turban, roamed around the village visiting one haunt after the other. He would carry a shining well-oiled staff in his hand. His friends and companions flattered him by calling him a man of means and enjoyed themselves on his money. Amrik remembered his father had a few small hobbies and pastimes to keep himself occupied. In addition to practising jumps and playing Kabbabi, he had some hounds of a very good breed and often went out hunting with his friends. Every second or third day, meat would be cooked in their kitchen and drinking and revelry would continue till late into the night in the room upstairs.

That was the time when the new seeds and fertilisers had not become common. So Kartar Singh had no interest in buying any land, agriculture not being a very profitable proposition at the time. Otherwise also, he was perhaps never bothered about earning much. He threw away in pursuing his pleasures all the money his father sent him. Nevertheless, he was treated with respect in the village because he was a good sportsman, wore fine, clean clothes, was the only son of a prosperous father and always had four or five people accompanying him with sticks in their hands. Whenever Amrik happened to accompany his father, he was always pampered by his companions. They would affectionately pat his fair cheeks and tease his father, “Your wife gives birth to a fine breed, O you moustache!” And when Amrik had grown up a little, his face would turn red from ear to ear on hearing a comment like that. So Kartar Singh was a big shot in the village and Amrik in school. No boy dared touch him. Because he was always well-dressed, they all wanted to be friendly with him. The master too loved him....

Remembering those days, Amrik became nostalgic: He wished his father had remained what he was at the time and continued to love him the way he did in those days.

Amrik’s grandmother often tried to keep Kartar Singh away from that company. But he didn’t bother about anybody. His wife did not dare raise her eyes in his presence. Women have no right to meddle in the affairs of men. This was his firm belief.... And days went by in this manner. Amrik’s grandfather came home once every three or four years. When he came at the time of Amrik’s birth, he got a big room and a verandah constructed in front of the two rooms. He also added a room on the first floor. He tried his best to tell Kartar Singh to be more careful with the money and not to throw it away. He advised him to buy more land and told him how he was forced to leave home when burdened by a huge debt he found it impossible to make both ends meet. And how he had struggled and saved money to free the mortgaged land. He also told him how manual labour was valued in foreign lands where nobody felt any humiliation doing any job, big or small. This hollow pomp and show was meaningless. Amrik remembered that when his grandfather came home for the last time, laughing he had told Kartar Singh who was sitting with his cronies in the room upstairs, “O Kartar Sian! Whenever I come, I come with a wish to talk to you, to talk my heart out. But I can do that only if I find you sober... when you are not drunk...”

“Say what you want, old man! If I don’t listen to you who else would I listen to? It is because of you, old man, that I am enjoying myself...”

“God bless you!” The old man was also on a high having had a drink or two. “What can I tell you... I have constructed such a big house for you... dear, I say, can’t you even get it white-washed before I leave this world...”

The whole group burst out laughing.

But Kartar Singh neither got the house white-washed nor did he buy any land. And his father left for the other world only three or four months after going back. Kartar Singh who

did not have a care in the world was suddenly burdened with all kinds of responsibilities. The money coming from abroad stopped completely that very day. His relatives and friends advised him to take control of his lands and manage the farming on his own with the help of a sharecropper; only then he would be able to manage his family affairs. And Amrik remembered it very clearly that his father and uncle went to Bikaner and brought an excellent pair of oxen. And when the pair with their silken white shining coat took part in the cart racing competition held at her mother's ancestral village, they comfortably won the first prize.

Though Kartar Singh had been burdened with many responsibilities, he still wore white clean clothes. His shoes would be shining bright. He gave the task of looking after the crops to the help he had hired and did nothing more than bring fodder home for the cattle. Otherwise he would idle away his time playing cards or sitting with his cronies in the village square. Everyone, friends as well as family, advised him to mend his ways: "Agriculture is profitable only when you personally toil in the soil. Nobody works for you if you are not there to supervise and control. You cannot do without that for a moment." Amrik's grandmother often chastised him for staying out till midnight, for sitting with his friends every day, "Son! Behave like a man... you have a family to support now. You have to work... You won't be able to live like this anymore."

"Everything would be done, old woman... Everything would be done.... You needn't worry." Then he would call Amrik's mother, who would be waiting for him in the cooking place for so long, and ask her to bring dinner.

"Why don't you control him, girl? If you serve him fresh *rotis* like this at this hour, why won't he get spoiled? When he comes home like this, feed him whatever is left over ... Mind my words... Otherwise you'll have to pay for it...." The old woman would go on grumbling.

His mother actually had to pay a heavy price. That night had left an indelible imprint on the mind of young Amrik. He

was with Bero, the neighbour's daughter. She was telling him stories when all of a sudden screams were heard from his house. Bero jumped to her feet and ran towards his house. Amrik followed her. There was complete chaos in the house. The kids were crying and Kartar Singh had a stick in his hand and was mercilessly beating his wife. He was dead drunk and was thrashing her without speaking anything. The neighbours came running. With great difficulty, they got hold of Kartar Singh and saved Jagir Kaur from him. Someone led him to his cot. Jagir Kaur was weeping bitterly and saying, "Tell me what is my fault!... I just said... Man, think of the family and all that needs to be done... and you are wasting all your money on drinking... you enjoyed yourself when we could afford it... Now we cannot... But he does not listen. Without a word, he fell upon me... and started hitting me with that stick."

"Forget about it... be brave. I don't know what has come over him... He used to be so good... he never behaved like this before...." The women went back after consoling her. Kartar Singh went to sleep without eating anything. Jagir Kaur finished her chores in the kitchen and put the girls to sleep. As she went to put out the lamp, she saw a despondent Amrik sitting near the cooking place. She asked him to get up and go to sleep. But he did not budge from his place. Jagir Kaur held him by the arm and made him get up. "Get up, dear son! Why are you...." She sighed and started sobbing.

"... All right, son!... As fate ordains...." Then these words somehow escaped her lips: "Amrik, I am going to jump into the river at Harike... Tell him when he searches for me..." and she started sobbing again.

"*Bibi...*" Amrik too could not control his tears. Mother held him close to her chest. And putting out the lamp, both of them went to sleep. Neither of them could find any sleep. Suddenly, the word '*Wahagurn!*' would escape the mother's lips sounding like a sigh. On the other hand, the words of his mother were still resounding in Amrik's head: "Amrik, I am going to jump into the river at Harike."

Amrik had not seen the river at Harike but he could clearly see his mother's bloated body floating in the deep waters of the river before him.... And then the image of that old woman Gabo appeared before his eyes.... Time and again he could not help wondering why go so far as Harike? His mother could easily jump into that well just on the outskirts of the village and die where Gabo, that old dalit granny had drowned herself.... or she could jump into some well... Why only Harike? And he shut his eyes tight. What a sin he had committed! Why had he thought about the death of his mother? He should never have let such a thought cross his mind.

And he began to think and speculate about his father. He had never ever behaved like that earlier even after drinking. He had never hit his mother... And then he understood the whole situation. His aunt had fixed the date for the marriage of two of her daughters. His father was her only brother and she wanted him to participate in the marriages in a befitting manner. That was the problem. Kartar Singh could hardly save anything from agriculture. He had been in bad temper since the day he received the letter. How to arrange the money? He had gone to the money-lender but he had asked for an exorbitant rate of interest. She was his only sister and he was her only brother. The sister had written that it was a rare occasion. She was not going to arrange the marriages of daughters every day. Kartar Singh had to perform the responsibilities of the brother as well as that of the father. Kartar Singh had asked Jagir Kaur to give him the ornaments she had. He had been trying to convince her for a long time but she was adamant, "What else do I have... All my other possessions are gone... Now you want to take these too away...."

And Amrik could not make up his mind whether his mother was wrong in refusing to part with her gold or it was improper on his father's part to try to take them away. Or was there something deeper to it? Caught in the dilemma, he fell asleep.

The aunt's daughters were married off but two out of ten acres of land had to be mortgaged. Kartar Singh's drinking

became worse. It became a routine with him. He would be dead drunk when he returned home every night. Then he got hooked on to opium also. And by and by, he became a hopeless addict. His relatives and the family advised him to stop, to control himself. And he did try to get rid of his addictions but the drug and the drink appeared to have taken possession of his body. Amrik saw his father grow old within a matter of a few years only. The mood in the family would always be tense and angry. Debts mounted. Jagir Kaur could not jump into a river or well. She continued to struggle and stumble through life in her home.

Kartar Singh no longer enjoyed the good reputation that he had in the village in his youth. Gradually Amrik's attitude towards his father too underwent a complete transformation. From an adorable figure he became an object of disgust. And they were often irritated with each other. Smallest provocations could make their anger boil over and erupt violently. And that seething volcano did erupt one day. They were in touch with a boy's family about the marriage of Banso, the eldest girl. The others refused to accept the proposal for the reason that the girl's father was a drunkard and an opium addict. And also because their family was seen to be in dire straits. Irritated by the humiliation, Amrik had confronted his father but the latter retorted: "I live off my father's property, you understand! And I am not going to stop spending because some bloody wretch like you asks me to.... What do you give me? You tell me, have you ever given me a single penny?... Considers himself a big benefactor!..." Amrik had not answered back. The fact was that he gave half his salary for the family every month. And it was used for meeting household expenses. But Kartar Singh resented the fact that he always gave the money to his mother... Why did he not hand it over to him?... So he did not feel obliged to him in any way.

"O my dear son! I wish God had taken me away instead of you! O dear, you are gone leaving me alone to suffer in this world." The old grandmother, mere skeleton, lying on her cot, wailed. Girls lying next to her too began to sob.

“Silly girls! Why are you crying?... May your brothers live long!... You needn't worry.” Jagir Kaur tried to console her crying daughters. “Pray for their long life and well-being.. He married off you both... Only Nikki, the youngest, remains... and this little boy... children at his age don't have a care in the world... and he has been driving the oxen and ploughing since so long...” Trying to comfort the girls, she too was overcome by emotion.

“O mother! Who would love and receive us when we come here from our in-laws? *Ha!* Who would fulfil our demands now...?” The eldest daughter could not control her wailing. Amrik sat lost in thought. He felt like consoling them. But he feared that if he opened his mouth to say anything, he won't be able to control his tears. What a trouble his father had landed him in! As if the central pillar of a huge structure had given way and the whole of it stood precariously shaken, on the verge of a collapse. Feeling weak and powerless, he again lay down on his cot. He wanted to forget his grief for a while by turning his attention to something else. For a moment he thought of the wife of Diala the hunchback. She came to their house and sat with other ladies to express her condolences. As all of them sat grieving with their veils pulled down over the faces, she slyly used her spittle to wet her eyes so that she may satisfactorily perform her duty of grieving over his father's death! When he saw her do that, he could not help laughing in his heart of hearts. But he could not openly laugh at her conduct nor could he smile to himself... He could see before his eyes the figure of his father. He shook his head, turned in his bed and began to think of the lines from the holy text recited by the unlettered priest in Gurdwara at the time of his father's *bhog* during the day. The priest had misread the text and all the people sitting around had smiled hearing Amrik remark, “Baba! Forget about sending my father to the heavens with your prayers, you are certainly going to reserve a place for yourself in hell with your blasphemous misreading...”

But the smile did not last. And all members of the family, who were now his responsibility, began to appear in his thoughts

one after the other. He would have to be a father as well as the brother to his sisters. The youngest one, who was still a student, had to complete her studies and then he would have to arrange her marriage. He would have to look after each one of his mother's needs but it must be done with great care. If he failed to fulfil any of his sisters' needs or if something went amiss in his dealing with his younger brother or sister, everyone would blame him. “He is only an elder brother! If his father had been alive, it would not have come to this pass.” He had to take care that mother did not feel the loss, otherwise she would time and again think of what other women said to her, “Sister! You have lost your authority... You did what you liked in your home... Now, your sons... though with God's grace, they are so good... you'll depend on them for every one of your needs... like a beggar... Your authority is gone with your husband...”

Money was required for all he was expected to do. Amrik decided he would take personal interest in farming. Only then would all needs would be met. His father had mortgaged another two and half acres of land at the time of marriage of the girls. He felt if they took care of the remaining five or six acres and used fertilisers for the crops, they could earn enough to meet all the daily expenses of the family. He would spend all his salary with his own hands. Earlier his salary used to just go away. He hoped that Mohinder would take interest in farming and they would be able to earn enough to get their mortgaged land back after some time.

He was to leave for his job early next morning. So he decided to talk to his younger brother. “Mohinder, you must be strong now and take full interest in farming. I would come every week. Sow fodder in the three-quarters of an acre that we still have with us next to the two acres mortgaged to Jeeta... I went to have a look the day before yesterday... We'll plant paddy in the land next to it... Is that right?”

Mohinder did not speak a word. He kept frowning at the stars in the sky and then turned to look the other way. As if he didn't wish to say anything purposely. When Amrik spoke again,

his mother Jagir Kaur responded, “That land was mortgaged last year...”

“Which? The one on the other side?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” There was a hint of anger in his voice.

“When we went to attend the last rites of the mother-in-law of this girl... at that time...” Jagir Kaur spoke in a hushed tone.

Amrik thought it was no use losing his temper now. Had he taken interest in the affairs of the family early, the lands would not have been mortgaged. So he accepted it as his fate. “And then what remains with us?” He asked the vacuum around him. There was no reply.

“And still the cost of fertilisers remains to be paid... I don’t know where that fertiliser went... there was hardly any harvest...” And after mumbling like that, he went silent for some time.

“The fertiliser was sold for cash and the money was spent away... It was never used for the crop...” Mohinder spoke for the first time. It could not be said if there was apathy or anger in his tone.

Hearing this, Amrik felt rage surge in him. “I want to know... where was all the money going... Mother, you hid all this from us...” There was a tinge of resentment against his mother in his voice.

“Son, what did I hide from you? ... You had simply cut yourself off from the family... He did as he pleased... all the money was eaten up by his addictions.... Don’t pretend to be ignorant about all this...”

He did not open his mouth and continued to lie on his cot. From where would he find all that money to pay back all those debts? How would he resume farming? Fertiliser was required for paddy also.

“Makhan Singh is also carrying a promissory note... He showed it to me... Father borrowed five hundred rupees from him... He told me he would talk to you about it after the rites are over.” Mohinder revealed another secret in the manner of one throwing a stone at somebody’s head.

“Listen to that! ... I wish to know if it is only the debts that we have...” Amrik sat up. He felt anger rise in him, but then the creases on his forehead eased a little. He thought, ‘All this has to be faced’. Then he said with a hollow laugh, “O dear! Tell me once and for all how much we owe and to whom. Why are doing it bit by bit?” After a little while he spoke again, “Lose your all and get branded a fool. People say all kind of things. By God! I feel so humiliated when people tell me he used to sprawl dead drunk in one street corner or the other in the village...”

Hearing him talk of humiliation, the eldest girl spoke, “Really brother, we were afraid to tell you at the time, but of late he had sunk really low. Two or three month back, he stole a kettle from home and sold it to Chanchal the tinsmith. We searched for it all over the place... Then we learnt the truth, paid the money and brought it back from Chanchal...”

Amrik was shocked. He thought if people had come to know about it he would not have been able to face anyone in the village. It was quite possible that, after beginning with his own home, his father might have started stealing things from others’ houses... as the thought crossed his mind, his sense of shame and embarrassment knew no bounds.

“Sardarji! What to tell you about him! Many times he would go into Chanchal’s shop and inhale snuff... and now he had started consuming the pills and drugs instead of opium... He chewed tobacco also...” Hearing what Mohinder had said, Amrik felt it was good in a way that he had not known all those things about his father... He did not do all that openly. So maybe even the people in the village did not know about all this. And if his father were seen openly lifting utensils, inhaling snuff and consuming drugs, what would have become of his family’s reputation in the village. The humiliation of the rejection of his sister’s marriage proposal had shaken his very being.

“Mother, is that correct?” He was upset with his mother. Why had she not told him before about the money borrowed, land mortgaged and about all the other vices and misdeeds of his father?

“Absolutely true. What else?” It was his youngest sister who spoke now.

“Going by that account, if he had lived for some more time the remaining two acres also would have been mortgaged and disposed off and we would have been left....” Amrik was still to complete the sentence when Mohinder interrupted him, “We would have been left paupers... facing bankruptcy and destitution. What else? I say, brother, he still died in time. It is good in a way....”

Mohinder laughed a little, having said this. There was no tinge of pain in his laughter nor any hint of joy. It was a strange laugh, not revealing anything. In the darkness of the night, one or two other members of the family were heard smirking. It appeared as if everyone agreed to what Mohinder had said. And they were all relieved that the head of the family had departed well in time.

Translated from Punjabi by Paramjit Singh Ramana

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1857: Looking for Things Misplaced

Asad Zaidi

Asad Zaidi’s disturbingly powerful poem (published in *Sāmān Kī Talāsh*, 2008) opens with a complex telescoping: 1857 has returned, with an immediacy it did not have in 1857. The battles that seemed far away are now right here, at the door. You could then put off the fight. You no longer can. You could probably say then, “It is for them to take care of freedom.” Now it must be taken care of by you. Delhi was a long way away then. It is everywhere now. One can think of two Delhis. The symbol of freedom to be won. And the symbol of a kind of power that is a menace to freedom.

There is guilt and a sense of wrong. Can we evade the burden of responsibility for all that has gone wrong? But then a generalized sense of universal responsibility might also hide a pathological condition.

The narrative voice is ambivalent. Are ‘we’ the people or the writers, or both? The soundscape seems to be ambivalent, but in reality it could be marked by a sharp, brewing conflict. For there is the restive, loud, carnivalesque India of people and the whispering India of agents, touts and opportunists. But the fears about the conflict could just be illusory, a product of our popular culture. Perhaps the very reality of contemporary India is a product of fiction and commercial cinema. An unreal, unreal reality.

But such a suspicion could also mean an ironic shifting of the blame for our sordid reality on to fiction and cinema. A guilt-induced aporia of representation. Our popular cultural representations have probably keenly followed the reality we have produced, but it is such a sordid, fantastical reality that we would just not acknowledge its existence and admit our concomitant responsibility in its making. The better option: blame the popular culture for all that has gone wrong.

The metaphor of noise again changes – to become, before