

# South Asian Ensemble

A Peer-reviewed International Quarterly of Arts, Literature and Culture

Vol. 8, No. 1-4, Winter 2016 -- Fall 2016

ISSN 1920-6763

---

**Editors :** Gurdev Chauhan and Rajesh Sharma

**Advisory Board (Hon.)**

Nirupama Dutt, Navtej Bharati, Ajmer Rode

Neeru Aseem, Sukhwinder Kamboj

Harminder Dhillon (*Legal Adviser*)

**Associates (Hon.)**

Harjeet Atwal, Amarjit Sathi, Sukhpal,

Dev Bhardwaj, Major Nagra, Vinod Kumar

**Editor India Office**

23, Sahib Enclave, Near Urban Estate-1

Patiala - 147002 (Punjab)

Cell +91-7837960942, Landline +91-0175-5070942

E-mail: sharajesh@gmail.com

**Published by**

**South Asian Ensemble Inc.**

276 Dundas Street (East) Trenton

ON. Canada K8V 1M2

Ph. ++1-6478662630

www.southasianensemble.com

E-mail gurdevchauhan01@gmail.com

editor.sae@gmail.com

---

*Copyright :* South Asian Ensemble.

*All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.*

**Disclaimer**

*Views expressed in this journal are those of the contributors  
and not of the publisher/editors*

South Asian Ensemble (Winter 2016 -- Fall 2016) 1

## Contents

1. Four Poems / Guy Simser / 4
2. Two Poems / Kavita A. Jindal / 7
3. The Amazed Eye / John Brandi / 10
4. When You Gonna Create / Rajesh Sharma / 19
5. Eskinomo / Cyril Dabydeen / 22
6. Musings on Him / Navtej Bharati / 26
7. Nirupama Dutt / Remembering Gurdial Singh/28
8. Sharing / Gurdial Singh / Trans. Nirupama Dutt / 30
9. Bajwa Has Nothing More to Say Now / Zubair Ahmad / 36
10. Fireflies in the Night / Nalini Warriar / 44
11. Penguins / Harpreet Sekha / Trans. Gurdev Chauhan / 55
12. Let It Run / Priscila Uppal / 69
13. Marxism and Liberal Democracy.... / Kedarnath Singh *in conversation with Amandeep* / 91
14. On Translating Flaubert / Harjeet Singh Gill / 100
15. Notes on the Shrinking Space of Literariness in a Literature Classroom / Sakoon N. Singh / 114
16. The Human Condition in Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Shadow' / Rosy Singh / 123
17. Four Poems / Parminder Sodhi / 141
18. Selected Songs Sung by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan / Trans. Ajmer Rode / 144
19. The Heron and Other Poems /Sartaj / 157
20. Three Poems / Usha Kishore / 163
21. Three Poems / Nabina Das / 166

## Reviews

22. Poems of Paul Celan / M.L. Raina / 168
  23. Ben Antao's *Love Triangle* / Shane Joseph / 173
  24. Sanjeev Sethi's *This Summer and That Summer* / Rajesh Sharma / 175
  25. Mihir Chitre's *Hyphenated* / Sapna Dogra / 177
  26. Rekha's *Gender, Space and the Creative Imagination* / Dharamjeet Singh / 181
  27. Basavaraj Naikar *The Queen of Kittur* / Navjot Khosla / 185
- Contributors** / 189

## **Not an editorial**

The art of literature is an affirmation of our power to be astonished.

In astonishment we acknowledge our limitations.

Limitations are promises of transcendence.

Transcendence is a crossing-over.

With crossings-over begin metamorphoses.

It is not easy to meet oneself. Far less to accept oneself.

Far lesser to metamorphose.

It is hard to be astonished.

But there is no other way.

*Rajesh Sharma*

## Guy Simser

### What time is it?

You ask and he is hard pressed to explain  
the four little words you pose in expectation  
of a simple answer he cannot give without  
turning to the infinite which is too a mystery.

*Time is in here (pointing to his head) buried  
deep within this brain's universe, somewhere  
between the sparks of consciousness, sparks  
themselves brief but somehow read in string*

*as connected; such the power of time, a mass  
less thing, if thing at all, a contradiction that  
lingers, existing only in man's mind as two  
options: now and eternity. Neither helpful.*

His now is not your now and never will be  
and eternity has no beginning and no end so  
where hides time in all of this? He has to say  
again, *Between the sparks of consciousness.*

### From on high

1.  
Roaring Fork River and Castle Creek, exalting  
the mountain's verve, embark on their unchained  
vernal run, two chutes each cascading to combine  
in kaleidoscopic confluence where Roaring Fork  
waves glitter and froth, gurgle and splash, stag-leap  
to meet Castle Creek's pirouetting prima donnas.  
Fusing here, they hum one to another then glissade

and pas de deux in eddies until roused once again  
cresting hand in hand to sculpt the mountain's face;  
face flashing flamboyant encores for a thirsty galaxy  
of chlorophyll keenly awaiting the sun's touch  
to unfold their buds, to expose sensual soft petals  
petals that will blush their chroma and aura over  
cold winter rot and praising water sprites' creation  
entwining Roaring Fork River and Castle Creek.

## 2.

Standing aloof from the budding spring spectators  
my feet long-spilling a clotting life sap, I pine. Oh,  
Ulanova how we danced with spring, sun-touching,  
sun-dreaming divine, while I held a wet buttercup  
to your chin and you one to mine as we rebounded  
barefoot off soft brook moss, sensing Yoni's power.  
Today, remote from the source, my waters prancing  
no longer, I pray, *Great Mother strengthen the down-  
rush in me that I may deliver your spirit of creation  
just one more time to the great sea, even as your  
sun-god now sets in me.*

## **A filling in**

This newborn of countless unknowns, of wishes  
and dreams, an array of cause and effect at age  
three now wading into Lake Ontario's before-the-  
war pristine water. Darwinian, half in and half out.  
What'll he become?  
She poses him in Zeiss lens black and white, then  
dreaming in technicolour adorns her Gaia gift with  
lush hand colouring. Her heart and fingertip art  
flushing a budding soul. Soul to be fixed now  
in a gilded frame for generations

### **In the eye of the fox**

Led into bush by my nose  
to a humming maggot mass  
gorging about its empty eye

I poked a stick into the reek  
and my amygdala gears up  
to haunt my tense REM sleep

where rubber glove experts  
collect ant-cleansed skulls  
found in the Medak Pocket

Rwanda or Darfur. Name it,  
everywhere and all the time  
parasites of countless types

slip under the skin, no matter  
its colour and there, bide time.  
Perhaps your neighbour's skin  
or God forbid yours and mine.

## Kavita A. Jindal

### Parakeet

You were brought here caged  
then let go  
you stayed  
your mewls and chweekchweek  
are incessant  
you're scarcely still  
flap flap perch flap flap  
you invader  
you drove out the weaker  
your obnoxious brightness  
streaming against the grey weather

Where can you go  
other than the trees nearby  
after you found yourself  
in unfamiliar terrain  
you cannot roll back  
to the moment of  
the capturing hand  
in that other land  
you settle and multiply  
your pattern unchanged  
being lustrous being avian

You're noisy because  
you like gatherings  
all squawking together  
morning and dusk  
when you feed  
midday saved for  
preening and loafing  
nights for some quiet

breaking out at dawn  
how well you've adapted  
to being non-tropical.

### **Outings with Daarji**

*Delhi 1982*

Once a fortnight I would visit  
And he would ask:  
What have you been meaning to do?  
What do you want to see? What do you want to eat?

More enquiries would follow:  
Are you studying enough?  
Are you sure you want to work for *that* newspaper?  
Who would want to be a *journalist*?

I had a rule of ignoring the latter questions.  
I would say:  
I've been meaning to see the circus from Russia.  
I want to eat golguppas  
and kulfi falooda from Roshan on Ajmal Khan Road.  
I want to eat Chhole Bhature in Chandni Chowk.  
I want to visit the Jama Masjid  
and that most serene gurudwara by Humayun's Tomb.  
Take me to the Ram Lila grounds for the final night  
of the ten-day enactment.  
Let's go to the mela right now to watch the kathputli.

These were how I announced my desires of roaming the city.  
He'd hail a three-wheeler and we were off  
to see the Russian acrobats, the lion tamers, the dancing horses,  
the clown on the unicycle  
and the trapeze artists who flew high  
with no safety nets.  
We were off to the kathputli at the mela,  
which I loved less for the dramatics of the puppeteers,

more for the hordes they entertained:  
the pickpockets, the bag snatchers, the little girls in stretchy red  
headbands  
clutching dainty Disney purses.

We were off to the benches in the maidan  
for the overnight Ram Lila  
where, that year, in the penultimate scene  
Ram shot an arrow that missed the actor playing Ravan,  
who then bent to retrieve the arrow from the stage,  
to stab it into his own throat with a deathly cry.  
The crowd applauded. Serious celebrations could begin.  
Towering effigies needed to be burnt and fireworks let off.

We were off to the minarets and cusped arches of the Jama Masjid,  
only to be rebuked for buying a burqa  
by the shopkeepers in its surrounding alleys,  
who stiffened but tried to be polite  
as they detected the turbaned Sikh sightseer: my grandfather.  
They could tell he was a wounded soul  
hanging back from them;  
they sensed he was one of those who'd lost his lands,  
escaping with just his life to cross the line of partition.  
They wondered what he was doing at the mosque.  
They might even have wondered aloud while I bargained with them.  
They never guessed that this was his indulgence to me.

These unpredictable outings were a treat for him too,  
I realise that now.  
Because whatever the response to his questions:  
What have you been meaning to do?  
What do you want to see?  
What do you want to eat?

Whatever the answer (and I was careful not to be *too* outré)  
Daarji beamed with delight, checked his wallet  
and hailed an auto rickshaw for the two of us.

## John Brandi

### The Amazed Eye

**Warm** summer evening. Lightning flashes, but the rain just won't come. Low clouds are stationary, humidity high. It's almost too muggy for my evening glass of wine. As for going to the desk—not the kind of weather that induces creativity. Despite the heat and stickiness, a couple of short ones find their way onto the page:

pencil	sunflower	on the porch
in hand	in the vase	my summer chair
stops for	still continues	overtaken
a gnat	to turn	by the garden spider

Hmmm. Months without penning a haiku, and this is all I've got? My own fault, since my self-imposed canon is to take to the pen only when a tremor erupts deep from within, or when the eye shivers with a tic of the unexpected. Why sit at a desk, stare at a blank page, and wait for the imagination to crank into gear? Words have got to rush forward while the body's in action, or else! Sitting at a desk waiting for a poem to come is like sitting in a dentist's chair waiting for a tooth to be pulled. I suppose I could go out and yank some weeds in the last remaining light, see if a thorn pricks the imagination; bend among the rambles, maybe catch the sudden apparition of a snake's eye. Or should I just sit and play games with what I've already written?

garden spider  
stops for a gnat                      etc . . .  
on the sunflower

Blah! Spend the muggy evening in this silly head trip? Think I'll make a gin and tonic, and see if that helps. Scribble some nonsense. Wake up in the morning, toss the rubble into the waste bin. You know the routine. You're getting nowhere. You've got to loosen the ropes, give yourself some slack.

*Take a friendly attitude  
to your thoughts*

—Chögyam Trungpa

Sunrise. Time for a coffee, and a phone call (no facebook, email, text message, please!) to an amigo who's been writing haiku for half his eighty years—and *not* sending them to haiku mags or literary rags, but to small town newspapers where he's garnered a devoted audience of nurses, teachers, street sweepers, mechanics, junior-college professors, the fast-food girl, the local pharmacist—a worthy and deserved working class.

*Write for the world to read and see  
yr exact pictures of it*

—Jack Kerouac

*I just want to be ordinary  
and finish my toast*

—Joanne Kyger

During a recent poetry residency, I was invited to sit in on a haiku circle. Disappointingly, only one or two poems hit the mark as far as what a haiku—traditional or modern—should accomplish. First problem (besides unabashed sentimentality) was that the writers began with an “idea” and ended with an “idea” (there are no “ideas” in haiku). Second problem: no leap, no surprise. The writers simply got away with developing a thought (since when does one “think” in a haiku!?) and pleasing their audience. Third problem: these people were not reading haiku—no serious ambition to investigate the masters, bow to them, quarrel with them, learn from them. In the forefront was the need for instant achievement—to be funny, charming, clever, intellectual. And receive the mandatory handclap. Phew!

*Man is an animal which adores  
Oh the intoxication of the mob!*

—Charles Baudelaire

There's little merit in haiku circles or neighborhood writing clubs whose members are given a long leash to "express themselves," receive instant kudos, and somehow—sans true ambition—be allowed to continue writing mediocre poems. Such "clubs" (*I wouldn't want to belong to any club that accepts people like me as a member* —Groucho Marx) seem to uphold the "everybody's a poet" notion. All you have to do is jump off the hay wagon, put a pencil to a scrap of paper, and begin. Hmmm, is that all it takes to pilot a 747?

Equally dreary are poetry groups where members—too often short on imagination, long on critique—workshop poems to death until the lifeblood's wrung from them. Yessir, the limp-rag syndrome. Best to immediately jump ship, take your treasured drafts to the Snow Hermit (Ransetsu), receive a good cuff and some worthy counsel: get rid of that barnacled anchor of old poems you've been dragging group to group! Be brave. Tear 'em up! Start over. And don't adhere to any master's method. Make it new.

*Resting on the earth  
who needs satori or faith?  
Embrace what holds you!*

—Edith Shiffert

*In every case you should be different. Continue on without regard to whether you are being traditional or innovative*

—Hajin

A student once told me "reading gets in the way of my writing." But I discerned laziness. Simple disinterest. As if the scent of an open book, beauty of typography, feel of the page, a little room in the margin for a penciled note was of another era. "Easier to Google what you need," and it showed in his writing. Information sans emotion. No innovation, plenty of convention, ease. How to respond to such writing? "Too antiseptic! Rumble it up!"

*Everyday language as a poetic tool  
Deeper, more essential realm of imagery  
Revolt against trite ornamental pictures*

—Yuasa (on Bashō)

Writer's block—another quandary that elicits gripes and groans in writing circles. Why not accept writer's block as a holiday? A little break in the cosmic scheme. Enjoy the pause, take a walk, watch the clouds change. Without forewarning or effort—while sweeping the leaves or scrubbing the floor—*bang!* Something will hit you, perhaps that spider ensconced in the corner who's been keeping house neater than you. Will this be another three liner? Or morph into something greater? Six lines, ten lines; a single horizontal line; a vertical stroke of lightning splicing the middle of the page?

*THE DRY*  
*fir needle*  
*rolling*  
*in*  
*the wind*  
*has*  
*a*  
*shad*  
*ow*

—Michael McClure

I met a *haijin* from Nara once, on the bullet train to Osaka. Beautiful but of hard mind. Every modern American haiku I recited was met with a quizzical frown. “*Not a haiku,*” she kept repeating; then proceeded to point out the rules. I had hoped my veneer of calmness would not betray my inner truth: Do I have to hear this *again!* A set of laws dictated by whom, what culture, era, geography, language? Stick to rules? Be strangled by strategy, plan, expectations? I’d still be gnawing at the baby-crib bars, if so. A comfortable pillow? I get better dreams laying my head on a wooden block. Or in a haystack, adrift.

*Steering the rudder*  
*only to find*  
*there's no water*

—j.b.

Why not toss the oars, set the boat adrift. Jump overboard, refresh the senses. Or stay on deck, let salt air ruffle your hair. Read your poems to the porpoises—a playful, intelligent audience. Or to the albatross—a true haiku bird, who, with the economy of a single wing flap, can coast hundreds of miles. Another possibility: strip down, take a sunbath, let the waves rock you to the swoon of a love poem.

*I cannot forget  
The perfumed dusk inside the  
Tent of my black hair  
As we awoke to make love  
After a long night of love*

—Marichiko

Return to shore. Revise and exercise, hike to the top of Mt Meru. High-heel it into the subway of spontaneous combustion. Or into the fragranced alley of seduction.

*Situation  
primary perception  
delight in chance.*

—Allen Ginsberg

Dwell in the surprised mind. Keep to an economy of words. Get sucked in like Jonah. Find your way back to the cave's mouth with a kite string like Tom Sawyer. Brighten the eye after a good dose of dark. Ride the bumpiest road you can find through the abyss of ache, the small notes of sweetness.

*Storms that rearrange  
the coastline  
this is my home*

—Diane di Prima

Within the rearrangement, wherever you are in the daily maze or psychic tangle, it's wise to develop, as did the poet Ed Dorn, *an excellent, if unconventional memory*. Let experience become a daily connection. Don't stand back and analyze. Become one with

it, present the exact picture of it. *No ideas but in things* (William Carlos Williams). Or, Sappho:

*One with violets  
on her robe, especially  
wandering*

Erotic yearning. Yes. *A thin flame running under my skin. That loosener of limbs!* Fragments, shards—they set the mind to working. One pieces together what’s missing, comes alive to her *vagabond love*, her defiant airs against war, prescribed roles, standards set by literary barons—those “rules” again!

*As for the critic—  
let brainstorm and maledictions  
sweep him away!*

Sappho. There’s always a good reminder in her poems. *Direct purity, perilous guesses, audacious twists, inevitable flights to the authority of intuition alone* (D. Fitts). And in her hesitancy over those who had money but no culture; her mistrust of “high-stylers” who’d rather have “art,” not poetry; who’d go to the dictionary rather than look right under the nose for the perfect symbol.

*Come oh holy lyre—  
speak to me and become a voice*

Precision in musicality. Sound giving shape—wind in the laurel groves, ruffling riverbanks, wafting seed from fennel heads. How you stray when in sleep. Jive on the dance floor. Rock while lovemaking. Lose your way in a jazz improvisation. Bop-ology. Muse-ecology. Sun Ra. Monk. Miles. Billie Holiday. Rudresh Mahanthappa.

*Blow as deep as you want to blow*  
—Kerouac

One day, wake up. No map, no formula. You’ve been deceived by literary fashions, frauds, style, technique, posturing award-winners, *the masters of gray* (Lorca). What to do, but ditch the

scene. Knock down the No Trespassing signs, part the leaves, head upstream. What's hidden in the woods is worth the tangles. No forced unnatural imagery here. You swelter as you walk; the butterfly remains light, rises on the heat. A warm drizzle brings mosquitoes. You begin to get aggravated; yet, at your feet: tiny, rain-jeweled purple gentians! Plenty more discoveries await. You're off your seat, you've rambled the fields, visited the peaks, relaxed in a pool, re-tuned the nerve endings.

*In the mountains all day  
the ants too are marching*

—Santōka

I was once invited by a haiku group to a mountain hot spring at a Zen centre in New Mexico. The idea was to “workshop” a few poems (bring your hammers and saws). The women were topless, I wasn't sure where to look. I drifted away, into a pure blue sky crowning the cream-colored canyon walls. At their base, big blooms of datura—hallucinogenic moonflowers. A magical place. Quiet at first, but after a few short poems were read, the nit-picking began. The canyon began to echo with voices: tearing apart, blathering on, quick-fixing lines, rearranging dashes, periods, caps according to dictums having nothing to do with picture, content, immediate perception. The men were mental. The women sought relief by disappearing under the steamy water and resurfacing with great puffs and splashing. Somebody offered a template into which images might be poured, revised, and perfected. Not a very democratic solution. My friend, the Japanese poet Nanao Sakaki, would have wrinkled his nose. “*Why so tight road? Too narrow to walk!*”

The poet Donald Hall compared “the template poem” to a McDonald's hamburger: reliable, undistinguished, marketable, appealing to a wide audience. This writing group was on the right track! Soon they would have a McHaiku!

*There are no gateways to haikai.  
There is only the haikai gateway itself.*

—Buson

It couldn't be stated more simply. Buson also recommended reading a good poem. But what is a good poem?

*If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off,  
I know that is poetry*

—Emily Dickinson

Poetry readings are often followed by eager questions: inspiration, process, development of theme, how did you come to that ending, etc. The answers are usually inside the poems themselves, if we relax and listen closely. Or read closely. Donald Hall: *Old poems that we continue to read and love become the standard we try to live up to. These poems, internalized, criticize our own work, become our Muse, our encouragement to song.* “A gateway,” as Buson said. But one must truly believe in a poem's power, its energy force, a tremble that shivers the spine.

Ambitious, self-inflating talk around poetry is of little help. We all know that. Dry, overcautious academic discourse is useless bark. It serves the dog who needs attention, not the poem that needs revision. I prefer fruitful, individual struggle, though not without the encouragement of a small circle of companions on a similar track.

*If people around you are in favor,  
that helps poetry to be, to exist.  
Under disfavor it disappears*

—William Stafford

Federico García Lorca, in his “Theory and Function of the Duende,” warns: *Intellect is often the enemy of poetry because it imitates too much, because it raises the poet to a sharp-edged throne and makes him forget he might soon be eaten by ants, or a great arsenic lobster might fall on his head.*

Allen Ginsberg: *Follow your own Unobstructed Breath. Syntax condensed, sound is solid.* Savor the original picture, immediacy of sequence, musicality. No approximating some unwieldy classical language, meter, rhyme, etc. No cloning another's poem, either (especially one held up as a model of “success” by a bookish scholar). Stretch, loosen up, pour some elixir into the mixing bowl.

*If you don't break your ropes while you're alive,  
do you think ghosts will do it after?*

—Kabir

We cannot forget the benefits of solitude. And rhapsody. Saigyō, Bashō, Ryōkan, Issa. Committed wanderers who took to the road, not for diversion, escape, entertainment, but as a Way: a spiritual path; a trail widening with every step into new watersheds, new crannies of the mind, new clouds and creatures, a new universe of fellow beings. Ah, yes: the bonds, the joie de vivre, the “amazed eye” opened wide—through poetry, mutual interests, a round of sakè, a hit of moonshine, a double shot of contagious brouhaha:

*The new year's first snow  
how lucky to remain alone  
at my hermitage*

—Bashō

*the laughter  
of workers—  
a single color*

—Hakushi

*Men, women  
and their shadows—  
dancing*

—Santōka

*fireflies flickering  
comrades sleeping close  
under the milky way*

—j.b.

## Rajesh Sharma

### When you gonna create

**It begins** with attentiveness. In this lies the innocence of art. And its power and menace. Art testifies to what is: a moth's wing, Homer's blind gaze, sky's one more face, that worn-out redbrick floor, a sweat-limp vest, clipped toenails, a star-dissolved puddle after rain, a dented helmet, oil rainbow on the gutter cap, a gas chamber filled with emptiness, a desert-weathered brow, the leaf-fallen disposition of trees....

Art's primal demand on man is that he use his senses – all of them. But that is where art's power begins to be menacing. Pass on, they say. Don't notice. Don't try to make sense.

Art can latch on to the ephemeral – like a string becomes suddenly involved with your foot – and make the ephemeral yield unsuspected histories. It does not consume the ephemeral but digs Time out of its intestines, disclosing what endures in what flies.

For senses to sink their teeth into the ephemera, the mind has to train in endurance. It is the mind that holds the senses to an object. As a battleground between whatever would control it and the imperative of freedom, the mind has to train hard. Yoga begins, Patanjali says, with the effort to restrain the mind, which is inclined to go running like a child after those several shifting whims.

In the novel *Artful*, Ali Smith has a dead man talk about art. Art, dying, the other world – it is an old country but “undiscovered”, as Hamlet knows. Why the urge to traverse it? Maurice Blanchot reads Orpheus's descent into the netherworld to bring back Eurydice as a metaphor of art's highest challenge: the passage through dying. If the artist is to stake any claim to being a creator, how can he bypass the realm of death? Art is not just reproduction; it demands rebirth. Which requires dying. It is a lesser art delivered by the un-reborn that skirts death or evades dying, for in dying alone shall art know its completion. And through art, the artist. Were Heidegger an artist, he would not have

despaired of man's quest for completion: art knows dying in ways yet unavailable to philosophy.

The ancient discord between philosophy and poetry invoked by Plato is no mere naive jealousy. Alain Badiou suspects, and discovers, something graver lurking in it. To him, the discord is essentially over the capabilities of art and philosophy respectively. A poem can think in ways and in terrains not generally accessible to philosophy. The poetic discourse can *think* unlike the philosophical because in it language burns to a degree that is just not possible in philosophy. Language and thought can melt and create singularly, flowing through the visible horizons of thought's given possibilities.

'Can I do a painting that is not just the visual translation of an idea?' An artist asks. 'If I can *write* a painting, why *paint*? As theatre may add sound and fury to a written text, a canvas may add line and colour. The text would be augmented, probably. But would that sufficiently justify the painter's claim to singularity – assuming he has the temerity to stake such a claim.

When you are a writer but venture into painting, you discover not only a new world out there but also here in writing, which you never knew existed. The singularity of an art explodes fully upon you when you taste another art and are seduced by it into another mode of being. Then the limits of your art, and your own limits, dawn on you and you find yourself on another planet.

In the tea plantations of Palampur, under the vague and misty gaze of distant deodars, I witnessed the accomplishing of a double work. One was the dismantling of inhibitions you often have – built like a protective wall since childhood when 'art' was a component of pre-school curriculum. You forget how you held a pencil or a brush for the very first time in your little, surprised fingers. That moment of initiation has been buried deep and lost to recall in most cases. The distant viewer, grafted onto the consumer, has accumulated a certain naive sureness about the world. It is an icy sheet, veiling and deadening, like a poison-laced lamination, your tender and sensitive fingers and mind. That sheet had to be melted.

It did melt in most cases.

The second work was that of the enthronement, in the vacancy so produced, of a new being, a fresh-eyed child. Here too the accomplishment amazed me. Some 'children' would not, of course, let the winds of freedom scrape off the dead skin of their big-grown 'I-know' self: they found a handle in technique and took shelter under it, reluctant to be shaken deeper down to let the child inside come fumbling, tumbling, bubbling, dancing out. But all, it seemed, could sense something new – a rediscovered sense of touch, a novel pair of eyes, a fresh colour spectrum, an unprecedented encounter with space in, and off, the canvas, and the seductive powers of chaos on which you build a cosmos when you gonna create.

## Cyril Dabydeen

### Eskinomo

*Always, in retrospect, the journey nort has the quality of a dream.*

– Margaret Atwood

In the Arctic, what's imagined from long ago.

*Really the Iceman cometh?*

Crossings on my mind as snow glitters, this alembic: nothing now being out of sight. *Who's she really?* Scary Old Drupattie wearing her Madrassie headkerchief. *Really her?* A voice, whisper. A household slave, on that first slave ship do you say? *Who can really tell with time?*

Going along to find the Northwest Passage, she's leading me on. Serendipity, ah.

My being on a nameless ship and observing her white hair, with cobwebby patterns on her face, Old Drupattie so used to working with her hands, I can tell. *Can you really?*

Kneading, grinding and spinning: an incorrigible weaver too, ah.

But now casting her imaginary spell, it seems, as I am yet with crossings on my mind, in my Snowman's guise, see.

–Make-believe, do you say?

Oh, she'd been through many passages and crossings long before.

*Before the Iceman cometh!*

Waves rise higher and the ship keeps canting; and those below deck are calling out: "Hey, Drupattie...help!" Like calling out to a Hindu deity from long ago, Vedas-long ago. Fore and aft, the waves rising higher. Now who's perched on the mast making a sign of the cross? What Christian sailor of yore proclaiming himself to be...*WHO?*

Not slave-liberator William Wilberforce in the English Parliament?

*Who...signalling?*

“Slavery’s evil! Let it be abolished for good!”

Ice crackles. Cold-cold, in the veritable North.

*Eskinomo, ah.*

Old Drupattie is unlike herself, once being on an indentured vessel coming from Calcutta (or somewhere like it). *Really...from there?*

Now going North she is, on the veritable Franklin Expedition.

*No-no, I hear again.*

*Yes-yes.*

\*

Really it was her idea that we go out on a rendezvous of time – like falsifying a dream. *Yeah, out with it.*

Old Drupattie’s gums start flapping, and she’s not making sense anymore. Who’s willing it? Let the deities have their way, believe me.

*Why not?*

–Yes, why not?

Did I hear you say Old Drupattie might have passed on, the old hag with bones piled up...now like a monument in ancient India, or Africa?

Drupattie crinkles her eyes, looking back, then looking forward to the authentic North. *Eskinomo? Really me!*

*Let’s walk more in the snow, she says.*

I keep shivering, as I go across an island-archipelago with her, it seems in the mirage of time. I rub my eyes, indeed being on the authentic Franklin Expedition. Now who’s the one named John Franklin, if a Seaman of Yore?

Drupattie beckons, and I am frozen in my tracks...with streaks of red before me. What else do I imagine from past days and nights?

Blood...or bloodlines, with memory intact. Now it’s a real slave-ship I’ve conjured up! And my yet being an invisible Snowman, white-white.

But Drupattie wants me to be my true self as she is herself. Not a ghost self? What the Snowman in me wants to talk about with her.

Nattering on, we are! Where's the real slave-ship now?

Where...in the ocean of the North? Waves beating from under sea, and rising up... as we move along. Where now Wilberforce, Buxton, Canning, in the English Parliament? Liberators all as I hear more voices raised! Voices demanding that slavery be abolished for good! Indentured labour also be abolished, ah. A ship yet plying the waters, indeed looking for the Northwest Passage-like an escape route.

The Franklin Expedition, d'you hear? Being on the *HMS Erebus* or *HMS Terror*. Indeed, *the Iceman cometh*. As the snow drives harder, a blizzard everywhere, the Arctic being like nowhere else.

Everyone's waiting...and watching: sailors with binocular eyes looking from the ship's masthead. Now where are sea-dogs like Drake...Gilbert, Raleigh? Not seeing icebergs only?

—It's what you've always believed, Old Drupattie says.

The ship's floundering, in more icy waters...or, stuck in tropical waters going through the dreaded Middle Passage, if you can believe it.

—*Eskinomo!* she calls out.

I reach out to her, touching her cold hands. A webby feeling, too.

Then Drupattie starts walking away. But I hear the ship's foghorn noise.

Here in Baffin Bay, and the year's 1845!

But I keep being on the masthead, like my foreordained place.

Distances crossed...and looking back at India itself. East...or West, and North...South again! I am also looking for Africa-looking...as Old Drupattie's also looking, bleary-eyed, because of the auspicious time. What I will never tell more about even in a shaman's guise looking up at the stars and seeing the planets ablaze.

Drupattie's face frozen in ice, like pumice. But I yet hear her calling out, to me...about the Iceman cometh...with myth in the making.

Or unmaking. Being north, then south again.

I keep looking everywhere, believing the Northwest Passage is still alive. A foghorn noise grows louder: what Old Drupattie keeps hearing.

What I also keep hearing...as a Snowman!

## Navtej Bharati

### Musings on Him

1

I don't speak to God  
He doesn't to me  
we are doing fine  
both of us

2

I have misplaced God  
don't remember where

This life  
most of it anyway  
has gone searching for Him

Thanks  
things are going well  
even without Him

It's my glasses  
if lost  
make going unbearable

3

Today I will not  
write a poem

Will sit in the sun  
like God doing  
nothing

Will decline to recreate  
what He has half-done  
play deaf to His bidding

Before me  
a kettle full of  
steaming green tea

Will invite Him  
for a cup  
may offer  
all bran cookies even

### **Lawnmower has no eyes**

This afternoon  
a cotton tail baby  
got caught in the moving  
blades of my mower.

some blobs hit my trousers

if sniffing them her  
mother looks me in the face  
I don't know how  
I would stand her look

If I were to say  
the mower has no eyes  
she would look  
towards mine

they suspend seeing  
when they follow the  
lawnmower  
I would try to come clean.

## Nirupama Dutt

### Passage to Punjab

*Remembering Gurdial Singh*

Late Kesar Singh Kesar, then a professor of Punjabi at Panjab University, suggested that I interview Punjabi writer Gurdial Singh.

The year was 1978 and I had just got myself into the role of a self-styled literary correspondent – reporting on seminars, poetry readings and conversations with Punjabi writers in English. This was an area in which I faced no rivalry from my peers, who thought me to be a bit nutty to invent a vernacular beat.

The professor went on to tell me that Gurdial was a prominent writer who had received the Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel *Marhi da Deeva*. He was visiting the city and I could come and meet him, he said. A day was fixed and I listed that story as my weekly Page 3 feature in a paper I worked for.

I reached Kesar's Sector-19 house and was face to face with this smiling congenial writer. I took out my notepad and pen to start the interview, but the writer was the one to put the first question. 'Which of my works have you read?' I looked at him in surprise and said in all honesty, 'None.' The next question was how I would write about him, and I simply stated: 'What you tell me!'

Now that's how scribes worked most of the time. It is not that I was all illiterate when it came to Punjabi. I had read quite a bit of Amrita Pritam, Shiv Kumar Batalvi, some of Nanak Singh but nothing at all of the writer I was sitting across. He smiled and shook his head and as tea was served he took out two slim novels. One was the award-winning one and the second was called *Adh Chanani Raat*, and one fat congratulatory volume called the *Abhinandan Granth*, and asked me to read them all and return in a week, for he was staying on in Chandigarh for some time.

Stumped, I took the books and stepped out feeling like a snubbed student. At office I had to tell the News Editor, a much acclaimed journalist, that I would be filing a feature on some other

subject. 'What happened to the Punjabi writer?' I showed him the volumes I was carrying and narrated my sob story. At this, the seasoned journalist said with arrogance that I should return the books and say, 'I don't have the time!'

I did not do so for I was eager to learn as I earned, and so I read *Marhi da Deeva* and was deep into the world of Jagseer and Bhani, skimmed through the granth, and my kind mother, an avid reader, read *Adh Chanani Raat* and told me the story.

So I was back in four days for the interview which I hope I conducted quite knowledgeably. The same News Editor edited it and gave it a fine headline: *His pen is his chisel*. I had earned my passage to Punjab by doing my first interview with a Punjabi writer and that too with one who became a legend in his lifetime. Interestingly, it was his first interview for an English newspaper. For years I was to recount this anecdote, in younger days over rum and later over coffee, and I share it again as a tribute to a rare person and an exceptional writer.

## Gurdial Singh

### Sharing

*Translated by Nirupama Dutt*

“Who is there?”

“It’s I, Jai Kaur.”

“How come you are here?” Bantu said this and his face lit up.

Jai Kaur hesitated for a moment and then said, “I have come from the city. The older daughter-in-law has been admitted in the hospital there.”

“Is all well?”

“Yes, she is going to deliver a baby.”

“Come, let’s walk to the village together.”

Jai Kaur did not know how to react to this invitation. The sun was setting and it would be dark by the time they reached the village. Luckily, no one else had got off here.

Never had the train reached so late. Normally, it arrived well before sunset but today it was running late. She had first thought of staying back for the night at her niece’s home in the town. But she felt like visiting her village and so here she was.

She glanced at Bantu. His eyes were shining and his face looked gentle.

“All right, let’s move on,” Jai Kaur said summoning up courage.

When Bantu took a long stride, the bundle of goods on his head almost slipped off. Holding on to it with both hands, he jumped as though he was trying to control a runaway animal. Then he murmured something and smiled to himself.

“So what else, Jai Kaur?” Bantu asked in an excited tone as they moved on. “Is all well?”

“Yes, by the grace of the guru all is well.”

“Thanks be to the lord.”

Then Bantu coughed. He looked around at the soothing sight of the setting sun, pink and orange, spread out on the horizon and

felt a deep joy. But seeing the tall shoots of millet shining in the half light, he lowered his gaze again.

The world was still but at times the sparrows hiding in the wild plants would stir on hearing their footsteps and start chirping. When they stopped chirping, it would be still and calm again. For a long distance Bantu walked on, hearing Jai Kaur's footsteps as she followed him. The sound of her feet seemed to him like the music of the cymbals in the Gurdwara.

"It must be many years since we last met, Jai Kaur?"

"Yes," Jai Kaur whispered back.

"I think for the past six or seven years you have been living with your younger nephew in Rajasthan," said Bantu.

"Yes!"

Jai Kaur looked up at Bantu and was quite taken aback at the toll the years had taken on him. He had stooped and was shaking out the sand that had got into his shoes.

His eyes were glowing with the rosy tint of the fading sun. But seeing his white beard, Jai Kaur's mind came to rest. She no longer felt shy or afraid of Bantu. It was as though she had not realised till this very moment that Bantu had grown so old. When Bantu laughed and moved on she was behind him and could see him closely from head to toe. Bantu's calves had shrivelled up and looked like dry sticks. The flesh on his neck was sagging. His back was bent, his shoulder blades jutted out like the horns of a calf and his clothes were very dirty.

Just then the other Bantu, from the past, stood before her eyes. Bantu was as handsome as a king. He was tall and well built. He had a broad chest; his eyes glowed like embers and it was difficult to bear their gaze. This was the Bantu she recalled.

Jai Kaur's heart started beating fast and she anxiously glanced at Bantu. But the next moment a laugh escaped her lips.

"How come you have become so weak?" Jai Kaur asked, her pitying voice breaking the silence between them. "Have you been ill or something?"

Bantu heaved a deep sigh and said, "What do I tell you, Jai Kaur? Things are really bad."

“Never mind, don’t lose heart so,” Jai Kaur consoled him. “This is the story of every home. It is not easy to take care of the family and make ends meet.”

“That’s true, Jai Kaur, but the times are so bad that no one cares for the other. I am too old to run about doing such chores. Ten years ago I divided the land among my sons. Soon after, they stopped caring for me. My two daughters-in-law are such wretches that they will get what they can out of this old man but not even bother to give him water to bathe or wash his clothes. But then who is one to blame, fate decides our lot.” Bantu seemed so like a little boy who had been beaten at home and was complaining to a sympathetic ear.

“Never mind, don’t let fate break you so!” Jai Kaur said in a firm voice. “Just look at me. I don’t even have my own home and have to live at the mercy of others. God did not answer my prayers. Now I have to live with my nephews. It was different when my brothers were alive. Everyone in this world is unhappy. Hasn’t Guru Nanak said that sorrow is the lot of the world! But what is one to do? We reap what we sow. The quality of the seed decides the richness of the harvest; such is the destiny of life.”

Jai Kaur kept talking and Bantu’s troubled soul found some solace. The only way to overcome sorrow is to share it with others. It was all the more important that he was sharing this with Jai Kaur because the two had a deep understanding between them.

Bantu glanced to the left. The different red hues of the sun had merged in the darkness and a few tiny stars were twinkling in the sky. The breeze had stopped blowing and one could not even hear the rustle of a leaf. The path had become narrow and Jai Kaur followed him unafraid. Jai Kaur’s firm voice, her full body, broad brow, fair complexion and drooping features, which nevertheless had a feminine attraction, were appealing and Bantu wanted to stop and have a good look at her.

“Jai Kaur, this is our field,” Bantu said as he rubbed his feet together and shook the sand from his shoes again, pointing to the standing cotton crop. “We have sown five and a half tons of seed right up to that tahli tree there.”

Jai Kaur stopped at once. Her heart was beating loudly and her breath was heavy. The tahli Bantu was pointing to was the same one which had witnessed an exchange between the two of them thirty or thirty-five years ago. It was under this tree that Bantu had stopped her and held her arm. For a moment Jai Kaur had been scared but then she had felt that Bantu should hold on to her forever!

Recalling that moment Jai Kaur got goose pimples all over her body. Bantu stood still while pretending to clean his shoes and he stared at her with his eyes wide open. Jai Kaur glanced back at him and then lowered her gaze.

She was suddenly afraid of Bantu and found his wrinkled face odious.

“There beyond the tahli is the millet crop,” Bantu said as though he too was recalling his old mischief. “I had asked them to sow cotton there but you would know well that no one listens to the old folks.”

“Never mind, never mind.”

“Jai Kaur, do you know my father was going to sell this tree at the time of my marriage? But I said that nothing doing. I told him that he could pawn the land but I would not let him touch the tahli.”

Jai Kaur felt a wave of sensation pass through her body. Why was Bantu going on about the tahli? When they started walking again Jai Kaur slowed down to distance herself a little from him. Bantu could no longer hear her footsteps. He stopped in his tracks, turned around and glanced back.

“Come along, come along now for we are nearly there,”

Bantu said to her. “Look there’s the village. Now we don’t have to walk much.”

Jai Kaur looked up and saw that the village was indeed not too far away. She took a few quick steps and joined Bantu. “Jai Kaur, ever since your sister-in-law died, I have felt there is no point in my living on thus.”

Hearing him refer to his wife as her sister-in-law and thus indicating that he was like her brother, a laugh escaped Jai Kaur’s lips.

“Well, Jai Kaur!” Bantu said again. “Things do change with time. When we were young, we never remembered God but now one appeals to him to end this existence. But death doesn’t come for the asking.”

“Do not talk like this. Why are you wishing for death just yet?” Jai Kaur intervened. “Don’t you want to see the weddings of your grandchildren and don’t you want to play with your great-grandchildren? The touch of a great-grandchild ensures deliverance.”

Jai Kaur’s words had a strange impact on Bantu. He wanted to die at one moment and live at another moment.

“You are right in what you say. But what is the point of dragging my feet through life? Everyone in the family is always shooing me away. No one wants to give me two small meals a day.”

Jai Kaur found that Bantu was indeed telling the truth. She felt the same deep understanding that they had discovered together thirty or thirty-five years ago. At that time, they were both young and single. They were no longer young but were single even today, living at the mercy of others. For twenty long years she had hoped and prayed that she would have a child but no God or Goddess, sage or mendicant, answered her prayers. Her husband’s sudden death ended all hope. For the past seven years, she’d been going for a few days to her husband’s family and then returning again to the doors of her nephews. She had to be subservient to them all for two square meals a day.

“I survive by serving my children and grandchildren. Otherwise they would have cast me away with a cot to the shed in the fields long ago.”

Bantu was still carrying on with his sob story and was sinking into the depths of self-pity once again.

“Jai Kaur, this is no life! And when I die, no one will even remember me. Such is the lot of a lone man.”

Bantu talked on but Jai Kaur was no longer listening.

She was looking at the lit lamps of the village that seemed to her like flames rising from a funeral pyre.

She turned around to look at Bantu. His thin legs were lost in the darkness and his shrivelled-up body was wavering. Jai Kaur felt very sorry for him.

“All right, Bantu, I will take the outer path to the village,” she said and added, “Do not fret so much. Let us laugh away the last few days of our lives. Nothing is going to change now so why crib all the time?”

“That’s true, that’s true!” Bantu said and turned to take the other path to the village.

## Zubair Ahmad

### **Bajwa Has Nothing More to Say Now**

*Bajwa hun gall nahi karda*

*Translated from Punjabi by Anne Murphy, with Zubair Ahmed*

Bajwa arrives. I've been waiting. He sits for a bit. When the mosquitoes start biting his feet, he says, "Shall we go?"

After days and days of phoning each other, we had finally fixed to meet at our old café on Mall Road. But it wasn't really ours anymore. It had become something entirely new, with a strange face. This was one of the last meetings, when the pleasure of meetings was running low.

The Sufi Fakeer Lal Shah says, "The population has increased, but our meetings have decreased."

*There was a time when one wouldn't even think of going home at night, even after midnight.*

Some time ago, while passing through Mall Road, I stopped at the old café, just like that. That was also a kind of last meeting. Sometimes the relationships we keep become mysterious, and sometimes the mysteries of life themselves become our companions. Perhaps these relationships are like the shade of clouds, floating high above. Most of our journey in this world is in the hard naked sunshine. The few companions we find, they are like the soft shadow cast by those clouds high above in the brightness. *How empty the bare light is, how inhospitable.*

The clouds cast their shadow for a moment on a bird floating on the waves of water, and then pass away. Not everything can be remembered, but the smoldering smoke of reminiscence remains. Sometimes it stops you, right in your tracks.

I sit down in the café and don't even bother to order tea. *Where are those evenings at Mall Road now?* Today the black of the night is deeper than soot, and my breath is choked with the

fumes of cars. But the mist of remembrance stirs a breath of fresh air amidst the dust.

“Political” Chacha (Uncle) recognizes me, and brings two cups of tea without asking.

He thinks Bajwa will be here any moment; the second cup is for him.

Of course, if he did come, he wouldn't stay.

“Do not concern yourself with the beloved... Do not fall in love,” Mitto, the drunkard always says, gulping a third.

*This city crawls up my back like a red ant.*

In the old days, Lahore was not so crowded. One would just happen upon an acquaintance on the road. Even people I didn't know seemed familiar in those days. There wasn't any sense of strangeness in the eyes. At the same time, there was no burden of an existing bond. Where did they come from, those emergent relationships, and how were they formed?

“Leave them, throw away all those ties to your heart.” God knows how much Mitto and Chaudhary are going to drink today.

Iffi Chatta comes to mind... places like this bear the scent of him. Iffi was my best friend in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. We went to school together. Every day when we were free I took him around on my bicycle. He was white like *Kheer* (rice pudding). His father was a police officer in another city and seldom came home; it was rumored that he kept another woman on the side. He spent most of his time with me, and at night I would drop him home. His house was in the second or third street of our *Mohalla* (neighbourhood). His mother used to say, “Yes take him, take him, you are someone to play with. Poor thing.” I would ride the bicycle and he would pay a fare: Four Annas per hour. I had become a big man just like that, though I did make concessions in my fee along the way.

What was school to us? We were not meant to become doctors or engineers, in any case. When we passed a class, we moved to the next. Neither was there anyone pushing us in school, nor did we open our school bags after coming home. When exams were around the corner, we would get a beating from our elders, so we would read a word or two and would pass.

He stuck to me like glue. I couldn't even look after myself, yet he looked to me for shelter. The other boys would pass us by, pinching his cheek hard, and he would cling closer; he was devoted to me. But I became tired of riding the bicycle. I didn't understand what his company meant. When he was the butt of the other boys' jokes, I would join them sometimes. I was his friend, but I wasn't loyal.

Then the end came. Faiqi slapped his bottom and said, while pushing me: "Wa, what a pair!"

I responded with a shallow, evasive laugh.

"You should have slapped his face!" But Iffi knew that it wasn't possible for me to pay them back in kind. After that, he didn't speak with me anymore. He flat out refused. And in 8<sup>th</sup> class, he left the school once and for all.

The tragedy of humankind is that when things unveil themselves in the dust of time, it is too late. I could not forget Iffi, and even in my old age I still remember that street where his house was. Whenever I go to the *Mohalla*, I make sure to pass by. I have wandered through it again and again, but have never seen him. His street ended at a dead-end, and so it still does today. The road is the same, and his house is the same. But where is he?

A while back my daughter returned to school after summer vacation and came home crying. She wouldn't tell us what was the matter. She was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and was a star student, yet every day she came home in tears and wouldn't discuss it. We couldn't bear to see her weeping. Then suddenly she stopped. And she had changed a little. She appeared a bit older; she had more confidence about her. After some time my wife told me that our daughter had quarreled with her best friend. Her friend had become close with another girl, and had dropped her. She implored her friend for some time, but she did not relent. So, our daughter gave up, once and for all, and made a new group of friends. After settling in with her new group, she forgot everything. But still, it all made her a bit harder.

*Why does it happen so? People remain in their groups, but then something happens in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and it all falls apart. Why is that?*

It's evening on Mall Road. A flock of birds hovers over The High Court. The dark red bricks appear suddenly like wild pigeons, and melt in a cloud into the grey evening.

The smoldering burn of memory descends like a drop of moisture in the winter air in the middle of the month of *Phagan*, in the last weeks of February, through that dark, half open window of reminiscence. I have experienced this air many times. It has swept through my body time and again, and I have born it each time.

Bajwa wore a homespun *kurta* (tunic) and traditional open leather sandals. He looked like a poet but he wasn't and never would be. He was sitting with Comrade 'T. T.' in a corner. Comrade T. T. had been called by various names, first 'Comrade Raidva' (Radio), and then 'Wireless'. Finally the name 'Comrade Table Talk' became his. You see, he once contended that the real thing is to be a master 'table talker'. He used to say that Lenin and Mao Zedong were actually just 'table talkers' and that all the successful revolutions in the world had been led by such masters. He used to say that in order to be a good table talker, it was vital that one listen to others carefully, to discover the contradictions in their ideas. Then one should grab those contradictions and play with them. From then he was called 'Table talker'. That was then abbreviated to 'T. T.'

It was his first visit in the café; the other comrades would stream in soon. Comrade T. T. would finish his cigarettes and have some brought to him. Sometimes the whole story got stuck on the point when someone had to stand up and bring the cigarettes, or walk to the counter to ask for tea. At some point, the one who stood up and went felt that he was being looked down upon, and he became irritated. Then he also became the butt of jokes. But Comrade T. T. was never short of people to bring cigarettes for him, and by the time one of his followers started to feel the shallowness of the Comrade's thesis, he would have found someone else. He always made friends with people younger than him, and educated them. As soon as they became a bit wiser, the first thing they would do was begin to argue with the Comrade. His opponents

said that he tried to own his friends, didn't meet them on equal footing. He treated them as if they were his pigeons. He took care of them, fostered them, and gave them food. But they didn't return to his roof when he let them fly.

I felt sad for the new comer. His years seemed to have passed prematurely. He was young but his lips were already darkening from cheap cigarettes. I was at that point planning to leave the group anyway. Comrade T. T. did not want me around. The repetitive, monotonous talks were new only for him. None of it really mattered to him anyway: He had escaped from home and from the narrow behaviors at the parties. He just wanted to be a leading talker. As Bajwa stood up to fetch cigarettes I offered him one of mine. He hesitated, took one and impulsively sat at my table for a while. Comrade T. T. glared at me with red eyes. It was my last day in that café.

I didn't have to wait long; Bajwa met me in the old Anarkali market after just a few days. He lived somewhere near the Leather Market. Even though his father was a government servant in some department, he looked just like us. I advised to him to be serious and continue his studies, but he kept talking and talking. We went to watch a movie, became friends and remained that way. He wanted to make a 'somebody' out of me: I was maybe a step or two ahead in school, and a bit senior to him in the political gatherings. I knew some people before him. But we were both alone and were destined to be friends.

We did everything together, all through those last days of our youth. Friendship, enmities and politics: these were all the same to us, and we faced them together. People spoke of us in the same breath. We met every day, and night would melt into day again. We were one. One night, after Zia ul Haq imposed martial law, someone from the Party gave us 1000 pamphlets to throw in every shop on Mall Road. When we finished our rounds, we headed home early in the morning. We weren't frightened at all. During the pro-democracy demonstrations near the Anarkali market on Mall Road, a policeman held me by the collar and started dragging me away. All around us, the Lathi charge was going on and there were people

and bodies everywhere. It was Bajwa who freed me from the policeman with a jerk, and helped me to escape; then he too fled. That police officer chased us up to the old cannon of the *Bhangies*, once used by Maharaja Ranjit Singh, in the centre of the city. But when he saw the crowd moving against him, he turned back.

Then suddenly Bajwa became angry and stopped talking with me. He just disappeared. It's true, I was a little bitter in those days. But it never occurred to me that he would leave me. I kept hoping and expecting that he would come back. How could he live without me? I am his shadow, his other half. He is not complete without me.

"Friendship is an unscientific relation, un-dialectical," the Master says.

"Friendship is in being there. It is in being present." says Rang Shah.

The window seems to be closing. The night is getting darker. There is no place to sit near Regal Chowk Square. The Mall Luxury, Lord's – all the cafés have long since closed. The streets of this city have made me sick; in a corner of the city, somewhere, the shadows of sunken memories continue to flicker like a small flame.

Why had he cut me off? Many things had happened, perhaps, to bring it about. We were equally educated, but I got a job, and he didn't. Perhaps he wasn't angry; maybe he just realized that our time was over, that time in which we shared all we had. Everything had changed: the times, people, and places. And so the city and friends would have to be changed. He became silent most of the time and would talk only in close gatherings or with one or two people. Somebody would remind us, "Listen to him, too", but who had the time to listen to others? One had to fight to express oneself, always cutting somebody else short.

It was as if he had been left behind. He didn't complete his studies on time: when I had become the father of a child, he was still in university. The girl met him there, and she changed his life completely. She married him, but took no pride in him. But I shouldn't talk like that: a man can only be happy with a woman. A man must concede to a woman. I thought that he would surely share his new

life with me, but he didn't. So a gap grew between us. For some time he did come to see me, and his wife somehow opened up a bit too. But it was at just that point that everything was lost. I didn't know what happened, but he soon stopped meeting me once and for all. It looked as if his wife had forbidden him to see me. Once or twice I tried to call his wife on the phone, but she hung up.

When I thought about it, I realized that all this might have been because of Mitto and Murshid, with whom my drinking had increased a lot. After his marriage, whenever he drank, Bajwa would go home chewing *Paan* (betel) in his mouth to hide the scent. I was furious and thought, what kind of a love marriage was it if a man had to hide such things from his wife?

And then who knows what happened, but the whole city changed. Everyone was lost. Our friends left, and so many years slipped from our hands, just as a traveler sitting in a night train doesn't know how many cities have been left behind. Seasons changed one after another. But I couldn't forget him. His memory left a subtle pain, a scar on my heart. I was a lonely soul with only empty days before me. Why did he leave me? Sometimes while passing through the city I would imagine him: he is right over there, riding a motorcycle, but unrecognizable because of his helmet. He used to go to political gatherings, so I thought we might meet at one and chat. But he couldn't be found. Someone told me that he had washed his hands of everything. His hair was gone now, and he looked old.

Not too long back, when the lawyer's movement was emerging, I too joined the demonstrations with a couple of friends. Old habits die hard. We gathered on Mall Road and shouted slogans condemning those in power at the Lahore High Court and Charing Cross, and then dispersed. Our old lawyer friends called us to join them: they thought that finally the dice had finally been cast in our favor. One day we joined the procession in the hottest hour of the day. The female lawyers were wearing black glasses and holding umbrellas; everyone carried bottles of mineral water. But the vigor of the slogans was no less strong.

After crossing Regal Chowk Square we surged forward, and saw a crowd of people and journalists at the overhead bridge of the Panorama Shopping Center. They were waiting there with flowers in their hands, and when the procession passed under the bridge, they scattered a rain of flowers over it. Being at the end of procession I could see the people throwing the flowers from above. All at once, I saw Bajwa among them. *Was it he or someone else?* It looked just like him, from a distance. He was holding a huge basket of flowers and was slowly throwing them over the people passing under the bridge. He appeared thin and weak. I waved my hands, recognizing him from far away; he threw flowers over us when we passed. The flowers clung to my hair and the petals slipped in my pocket. I didn't brush them off. I dreamt of Bajwa's flowers for many days after that: I am passing under a bridge and Bajwa is throwing flowers from above.

A life has passed but the fragrance of Bajwa's flowers still hangs in the air.

## Nalini Warriar

### Fireflies in the Night

*an excerpt*

The rains have let off leaving behind a soggy, muddy ground. Walking back from school, my shoes fart as they sink in mud and I have to exert pressure to lift the heels out of the mud. They make a plopping sound. It is like a strange music. I walk home slowly allowing lots of time between steps.

Broop. Plop. Broop. Plop.

There is even a beat. Reaching home, I take off my shoes and socks at the door. The soles of my shoes are caked in dark chocolate mud. I swipe a finger over it. The mud is smooth. Wiping my finger on the step, I open the front door and leave my shoes outside. The house is quiet. There is no sound from the kitchen. I know Anu is in her room. I drop down on all fours and crawl to her door.

I knock on Anu's door. I haven't seen her all day.

'Go away!' her voice is muffled.

'It's Kavita,' I say as if I need an introduction.

'You can go away too!' is her reply.

So be it.

Just when I think we are getting to be sisters again, Anu shuts me out. And the Chinese threat of an invasion fades.

'Come on, Kavita!' Amma calls.

It is my turn to accompany Amma to the market in the evening. The market is at the edge of the

Nangapura forest. Achan parks the car on the outside of the market. He likes to have lots of space around him when he manoeuvres the car in places where there are throngs of people. Even though petrol is also rationed, Achan manages to have an extra jerrycan in the shed.

The market is a maze of alleys dotted with puddles. Shops line both sides of the path. There are vegetable shops with baskets

of flat beans, potatoes, string beans, carrots, cauliflowers and broad beans. There are *paan* shops where condiments glitter in glass containers. There are dry good shops with rice, lentils and beans. And there are the spice shops with baskets of cinnamon, cloves, cumin, cloves, cardamom and chillies. I like these the best. I can stand there all day and breathe in the smell of spices.

The market is noisy as usual with shopkeepers calling out the price of their wares. Amma is inspecting rice. She stands in front of a row of bins, peering in, to look at the rice at the bottom. From each, she takes a handful, examines it closely and sniffs. One bin contains an extremely aromatic variety of red rice. Its scent is so pungent she does not even stop near the bin. After buying rice, she gets out her ration card and asks Gopal to get sugar, flour and oil. Beans and potatoes are the most common vegetables. Here and there pyramidal stacks of red tomatoes catch my eye.

‘Amma, how about some tomatoes?’ I ask.

She shakes her head. ‘Too expensive.’

It has been a long time since I’ve bitten into one. And yes, it is true I hated tomatoes in Dibrugarh. But a lot of time has elapsed. And people change. I sigh, swallowing back the memory of their sweetness. Like everything, my feelings toward tomatoes have changed. I don’t hate tomatoes like I used to. In fact, ever since Amma has stopped feeding us scalded tomatoes, I long for them.

A siren wails. People stop for a moment, look around then run. Amma grabs the shopping bag and says, ‘Come on, Kavita. Stay close to me.’

One moment she is ahead of me. Then she is gone. A man gathers his dhoti in his hand, and says to me as I stand there staring around me, ‘Go. Go, *beti*. Don’t just stand there.’

I hate crowds. The market fades and in its place are running bodies. No single face stands out. It’s just a blur of bodies. I hear a child cry. I smell sweat. And fear. My heart pounding, I run straight ahead, as the siren wails. Not wasting a glance to either side of me, I push my way through. Soon I realize that the best way is the path of least resistance. I stop pushing and let the crowd carry me forward effortlessly. I hold my arms tight against my body, the

elbows sticking out, ready to do some damage if any hands reach to grab my breasts. Something brushes across my chest. I feel the chill through the thin cotton fabric of my dress. I bend my head, open my mouth wide and clamp my teeth around the object. Still moving, I spit the chunk of brinjal out.

The crowd deposits me at the edge of the market. By now, the honking of the scooters joins the car horns. There are people as far as I can see. I can't remember where Achan has parked the car. I don't want to go back into the crowd. So I stand there. When I see two men leap into a shop, grab baskets and cart them away on their shoulders, I realize the market could be a dangerous place. The siren is still wailing. There is a slow whistle that becomes louder and louder. Then there is a loud bang near me. In the exploding light, I see a woman, her sari trailing behind her, fly through the air and land on the ground with a thud. The ground breaks and throws the *paan* shop in the air. Glass shatters and all around me are pink-coloured grated coconut and betel leaves. The brass utensils fly higher than the woman or the paan shop itself. I hear dull metallic thuds as they land somewhere further. I run into the Nangapurna forest.

Devi stands in the middle of the market square, looking wildly about her. Where is that daughter of hers? A few feet away a deep hole in the ground has collected some of the market produce. A heap of smashed vegetables – tomatoes and gourds topped with rubble – lies ahead of her and she stumbles toward it. The tomatoes look like the ones she used to feed her daughters, soft and runny, oozing juices and seeds. Red, yellow and brown streaks are everywhere and mixed with the smell of cloves, chili and cinnamon is the ghastly odour of something she cannot identify.

It is the smell of seared flesh. Being a vegetarian, she is unfamiliar with it and so does not recognize it. A woman is picking herself up and is on all fours. Further away, a man holds his head in his hands. Their mouths are open but she does not hear any sound. Among the rubble, she can clearly see a human hand. She gasps and presses her fingers on her lips.

The explosion! She does not hear her own whimper. The world has suddenly become silent at a time when it should have been screeching, moaning and groaning. Her head feels as if it is wrapped in cotton. She staggers on unsteady legs through what is the market square. She looks for Kavita everywhere. She lifts sheets of corrugated metal and peers underneath, her heart in her mouth. She expects to find her daughter's twisted, bloody body trapped under the debris. As she moves from one pile of mangled metal to the other, she stumbles on brass utensils, kicking them further away. They roll aimlessly around until gravity brings them back to their inert state. She is panting now. She does not know if she can survive the death of another child. For a few moments, she is the mother she once was again, full of despair and sorrow. Then she sees her husband standing by the Fiat. The sight of him there upright and obviously unharmed brings the events of the past year back into focus. A wave of anguish floods her entire being and she is unable to move.

Her darling boy is gone forever! And she sinks to her knees, covering her face with her hands. Tears trickle down her cheeks beneath her palms. She can taste their salty residue on her lips. They are pulled back from her teeth. She can feel it. Her lips are quivering yet she cannot hear her sobs.

It is then that she realizes she cannot hear.

Krishnan rushes to her side, his heart pounding with fear. He does not dare ask where his daughter is. He is afraid of the answer.

'Devi! Are you all right?'

She lifts her tear-stained face to him and his heart almost stops beating. His daughter is dead, he is certain of that. He can see it in Devi's face.

'I...,' she says. 'Wh....'

'Yes? Where is she? Is she with you? Did you find her?' he manages to squeeze the words past his dry lips.

She shakes her head. She doesn't know where her daughter is. He kneels beside her and shakes her. Her head flops to and fro. He sees her lips move and bends to catch what she is saying.

‘Stop shaking me!’ she shouts in his ear.  
He jerks his head back.  
He realizes she can’t hear.

Funny how quiet it is here in the forest. Under my feet, the ground gives in gently and then springs back. Above me, light filters through a canopy of trees. I push aside some branches as I move deeper into the forest. I pluck a leaf, rubbing it between my fingers. A whiff of menthol hits my nose. Eucalyptus, I think. Still further I find a tree with leaves smelling of cinnamon.

That I know. *Tejpata*, Amma says. She uses it to flavour the biriyani. I don’t know much about trees. I can tell the gulmohar, tamarind, neem, coconut and banyan trees apart. But that is all.

It is quite another world here. I examine the vegetation, stopping to stick my nose in a bloom. It is an epiphyte, that is what I believe it is called. It has its roots in the trunk of a tree. The petals are waxy and thick. It has no scent. The watch around my wrist tells me I have walked for an hour. The forest is very quiet. Light streaming down from the canopy is diffuse. Under my foot, a twig snaps. The sound echoes. Then there is another one.

I realize I’m alone. The forest envelops me. I’m in a cocoon. I don’t want to leave. I don’t think anyone will miss me. And I don’t care if I ever see any of them again. As it is, I’ve been alone for a while. It wouldn’t make any difference.

Anu will marry and go away soon with a doctor or an engineer. That is the path drawn in front of her. If Amma has her way, it will be my destiny too. To have a life only as the wife of someone. His identity will become mine: My existence and my self-worth defined by his profession. Arun is never coming back. As for Amma, I don’t see her as my mother any more. She is this stranger who doesn’t see me. I go with her to the market because I have nothing else to do. The marriage of her eldest daughter will bring her the kind of recognition she craves. And Achan is not the same father he was.

I hear the squawk of a bird. I glimpse the flutter of wings. I see a faint light up near the tops of the trees and I walk toward it,

not knowing where but perfectly content to let it happen. A few more steps and I will sit down and rest. My legs are aching and I glance at my watch again. It hasn't moved from the spot if I'm seeing clearly. Holding my arm high up so that I can see the dial better, I stare at it. My eyes do not blink and I don't dare move them. The stupid thing has stopped working! How will I know how long I'm in the forest? How will I know if it is day or night?

Somehow *that* seems important. That I keep track of time. I think furiously for some time. I slip the watch off my wrist and consider giving it a good whack. I let it dangle from my fingers and I swing my arm. As my eyes follow my arm as it arcs through the air, they fall on the black leather of my shoes. I'm wearing my school shoes. And for once they take a very important place in my life. I've never given shoes much thought. They are just something on my feet so they don't get dusty. Apart from that they have other duties: protect me from stepping on sharp things; protect my soles from the heat and that sort of thing. My shoes are spotless today for I have just polished them. The scuffs are gone and the leather shines back at me as I look down.

I hunt for a stone with a sharp edge. When I find one, I make a mark on my left shoe.

### **Day 1.**

Just in case. I'm sure I will get out of the forest. I'm not afraid. I can see light over there. I ignore the ache in my legs and stride purposefully forward. I hum a song and have the urge to sing. I start softly then as the words flood my mind, I begin to sing out loud. I can recall the tune and the words perfectly. Even if the lyrics are faultless, the sound coming out of my mouth does not sound right to my ears. I have a good ear for music but unfortunately there seems to be no communication between my ears and my vocal chords. The song I'm singing is one Anu has sung to me often. It does not sound like the song she sang. The actual sounds I'm making do not match the tune in my head and it dies on my lips. With it my high spirits begin to take a dive.

My shoulders pull in as I lower my head, pushing my body forward. I can feel my stomach shrink with every stride. It is lying low quietly as if it knows no food is going to be forthcoming. It is on my side for the moment. Craning my neck still further down, I watch my legs move. And of course, on cue, I become aware that they are aching. To distract myself, I start counting my strides. I realize I've walked for a while: one thousand strides. And the light I glimpse over the treetops is very faint. After a few more strides, I have to revise my thoughts. The light I'm walking toward is an illusion. It will disappear soon. I'm sure of that now. Since it had been evening when I was at the market, it is probably night right now. It would explain the disappearance of the light and the silence of the birds. I'm thirsty. And hungry. I'm more thirsty than hungry because my stomach is still behaving itself. The minute that thought penetrates my mind, my throat begins to itch. It itches so bad I wish I could go back to the second before I became conscious of thirst. But try as I might, it is impossible.

Some people can smell water.

I am not one of them. I have to rely on my ears. I turn my head this way and that hoping to catch something that will sound like water. The forest looks wet. Under those trees over there, I see the gentle curves of ferns. I follow the growth deeper into the forest until I come across a brook, flowing quietly through the trees. It has burrowed a path through mossy banks and as soon as I see the water, my thirst becomes unbearable. I kneel on the thick carpet of moss and cup my hands in the water. It is icy. My hands tremble with the cold but my lips tingle. I swallow one mouthfull. Then another. It is fragrant. Earthy. And refreshing. It gives me new strength.

I choose a dry spot, thick with dead plant matter, and sit down leaning against a tree, waiting for the light to re-appear among the trees. I refuse to think about snakes and other creepy things. I must have closed my eyes and I must have slept for I see light between the trees when I'm conscious again. My throat is dry. I drink from the brook again and splash some of the icy water on my face. I can hear birds singing high up in the trees. And another

important fact leaps to my mind: birds are silent at night. So I can distinguish night and day by their singing and even squawks.

Wide awake now, I undo my braids. I take care to mark the spot where I put the elastic holding my braid. I use twigs I comb my hair with my fingers. I braid my hair again and reach for the elastic bands. Nothing. I can't believe I've misplaced the silly hair bands. Marking the spot with a twig is a mistake for there are numerous twigs on the forest floor. I must have moved without being aware of it. As I move through the forest, my hair unravels and gets caught in the branches in my way. I do need to tie it up. I look around for something supple and long, preferably a dry reed. When I find one, I split the long leaf in two with my nail and use it to tie the ends of my braids securely.

I take the stone from my pocket and scratch my shoe again.

## **Day 2.**

Devi is in the drawing room on the settee. She is sitting in the dark. She has not lit the petroleum lamps yet. She can hear again. The doctor tells her it is a temporary lapse caused by the nearness of the explosion. But there is nothing to hear in the big, old house. Anu is in her room as usual and her husband is out looking for Kavita. She sits in the dark wishing for normalcy to return to her life. She wishes for it fervently even praying for it as she sits in the dark listening to nothing. She prays silently at first then her lips move as her thoughts intrude and try to take over.

There is a proposal for Anu: a doctor who is working in London, England. From a well-to-do

Namboodiri family. He is ten years older and is perfect for Anu. This union will bring her honour and pride. And then her eldest will be gone. And if the younger one does not come back, she will cease being a mother.

She will be free!

'Oh Shiva! Why do you put such thoughts in my head?' she cries out.

No more tied to that sexual Neanderthal. No more only dreaming about a life. A life that will be *now* within her grasp. Free of this cage. Free to leave!

‘Oh Krishna!’ she prays now. ‘Oh Krishna, please forgive me. I have not been a good wife. Or a good mother. Please give me the strength to do both.’

She starts chanting, her body swaying to and fro. She is mortified. If any one else reads her mind they will think she’s a monster. What kind of a mother is she not to want her daughter back? The chanting out loud does her good. She is calm again. She gets up to bring light into the house again. She is at the door to the kitchen when a soft knock on the paper-covered pane on the window brings her back into the drawing room again. A shadow moves from the window to the front door. She doesn’t need to open it to know who it is. His scent filters through the gap in the wood. Her nostrils quiver.

‘What are you doing here?’ she whispers. Her voice grates and is raspy as if she has just woken up.

‘Open the door, Devi!’ his voice is loud. She frowns. ‘I have to talk to you. See you,’ he says, the sound trickling to a whisper.

She lets him in. Even in the dark, his hair is shining. She wants to run her fingers through it. Her hand curves into the gap between them.

‘You shouldn’t have come here,’ she steps back. The magical moment is over.

‘I had to come. Are you all right?’

Of course I’m not, she wants to shout out the words. But she pulls her lips back in a polite smile and

lies. ‘I’m fine. Now please go. My daughter is in the other room.’

He leaves just as suddenly as he has appeared, leaving her wondering if it had been a dream after all.

Just a foolish dream.

She forgets the lamps and throws herself on the bed, her body writhing on the immaculate bed spread. She wants to cry, great big slobbering sobs. But her daughter is in the other room. Oh Krishna! She cannot even cry out loud. But she knows in her heart what is stopping her from doing so is the source of her tears.

While it would appear to all that she was crying for her daughter she was actually crying over her broken dreams.

I drink a few more handfuls of water. It takes over the space left behind by air and I belch loudly. I even manage a snicker. If Amma heard me now! I drink some more and belch even louder, enjoying the freedom from restraints.

Table manners, Amma would say. I press my hands against my stomach and as the last gust of air leaves my gut, the flavour of my last meal fills the back of my mouth. What did I have for tiffin? Ah yes, samosas and coriander chutney. Yes, now I recognize the aroma. Oh, I'm so hungry. I could try some of the leaves. The forest is full of them: shiny, broad, pointed, frilled and waxed. No, no, they could be poisonous. I will have to wait.

I hear water sloshing in my stomach as I walk. I have no idea about the direction in which I'm moving. I follow the flow of the brook. It is downstream. It could lead me to a larger body of water. And a larger body of water means people.

The morning has extended I suppose as the birds are making a racket. I hear another sound. This time a rustling. As if something is brushing against the branches. I stop in my tracks. I try to pinpoint the origin of the rustle. There it is again.

Is it a tiger? I wish I knew more about this forest. That information would be invaluable now. But who can predict the future? If we could we'd arm ourselves against all challenges to avoid disappointment and then life would be so boring. If the tiger is preparing to pounce, please let it be quick. At that moment I'm prepared to die. I have nothing to live for. Amma ignores me and my sister rejects me. Achan does not live in the same world anymore.

If the tiger comes towards me, I will lie down on the ground and let it eat me. I hope it will be quick. Then I remember a tiger chases its prey. I will probably have to run for it to chase me. Dying is not going to be easy. And then I wonder if it is the same tiger that ate my brother. How frightened he must have been, my little brother! His face springs to my mind and I shut my eyes. All

that was found was his little hand and a piece of his red shirt. I wish I had not let go of his hand. I cannot bring myself to run. I move forward slowly, one leg in front of the other, one step at a time. The rustle gives way to a crackle.

Crackle. Sizzle. Hiss.

My body slumps forward. I relax. A tiger doesn't sizzle. And a tiger will not make this much noise. I will not be eaten by a tiger after all. I come to a clearing. There is a round circle of stones from which smoke is rising. I don't know much about outdoor life but this much I know.

Someone is here who is not a tiger!

The edge of the clearing slopes upward. I keep my back to the forest and my eyes on the fire. I forge ahead to the top with my eyes still on the fire. The slope is steep and to reach the crest, I have to get down on my stomach and drag myself up on my arms. At the top, I peer down. It is eerily like a scene from the film I recently saw. Men in khaki uniforms are sitting around a fire. Burning torches surround the camp. A red star is on their caps. They have guns. Some of the guns have a knife jutting out at the end of the barrel.

Bayonets!

One of them turns and I see these are not Indian soldiers. How have the Chinese come so close? The camp looks as if it has been there for ages. So they *are* prepared. All about India stomping on China and teaching her a lesson are nothing but empty threats. Koshy Uncle is right. India is no match. For the Chinese are already here. I hear a rustle behind me. I drag my eyes from the camp. I turn. I stare into the barrel of a gun, the knife almost touching me.

It is going to be a quick death after all.

## Harpreet Sekha

### Penguins

*Translated from Punjabi by Gurdev Chauhan*

**I was** frightened; it seemed the snow-boarding boy would accidentally hit Keith and Jovan. I had come for their company otherwise my mind was not much into their game. Now I was sitting in the building and Jovan and Keith were playing outside in the kids' playground. Sitting by the window I watched them play. The children played with the snow, making houses or just throwing it upon each other. A separate area was marked for snow boarders. Still, that snowboarding boy had entered their ground which made me look in panic. Keith had also stood up reacting to the boy's unruly move. The snowboarder stooped for a while, changed direction, and fled the scene scattering snow. Some snowflakes fell over Keith's clothes. Jovan was lost in play. Keith swiftly turned over and stood behind Jovan brushing snow off his clothes and went on playing with him. I was beside myself with anger. My hands squeezed and a swear word left my mouth as if automatically.

Something like this had also happened a few days back when I had found a message from Shamsher in my Facebook chat box. He wanted to see Jovan. First, I thought it to be just a junk mail. I was aghast. When I got its full sense I could not contain my anger. What to talk of seeing Johan, how he could dare to post this message on my Facebook. I came to a boil. So many years had taken me to smother the fire that had been burning inside of me. Now it seemed only an ash of it was left. So all this was my delusion. If it was just the ash, how it could have erupted into ablaze. I again looked at the computer screen. The message had a photo of Shamsher too. I felt like spitting on that image of his. I was at a loss what to do. What had happened? I sat utterly stunned for some time and wrote:

“How you dare to post this message to me? I don't like my child to meet any stranger.” His reply came just right away. “I am not a stranger to him. The photo of him in your profile is the lookalike

of my childhood days. He is my son. I can prove it with the DNA test.”

My arms and legs started to shake with anger. If he had been standing in front of me I would have taken him to task right away. I didn't know how automatically my fingers typed, “Your look doesn't resemble with your father. Would you prove that too with your DNA test.”

“Hear O madam, no use calling me names. I can get it done legally. Now I feel the pinch of my mistake often years back. Still I want your permission to meet my son?”

My whole body began to tremble; my throat went dry as if something had stuck in there. First, he tried to prove that Jovan was not his son and how now can he have the temerity to say that Jovan is legally his? How it could be so easy for him to manage to prove so? How it could be that at one time you disown a relation and at another you claim it as your own son. I wanted to cry aloud, quite at a loss to know what had so suddenly happened. I got up from the chair in a huff and phoned. “Keith come home immediately.”

“What's happened.”

“You just come right now. Give them some excuse to leave your work. I need you here right now. Our Jovan...” I could not complete my sentence.

I didn't know it was fear, a disgrace or anger. It seemed something quite dreadful was soon going to happen. When Keith opened the gate, I at once clung to him. “I don't know what is going to happen”, I could not help sobbing. Keith hugged me tight, his hands waving my hair for a while. After taking a sip of water, I took him to the computer. “Read this. This rascal now says he is Jovan's father. He should know that just by sleeping some nights with a woman does not make one a father. Tell him how keeping awake for nights together, changing diapers every now and then, and exchanging breaths with one's son only makes one a father. Keith tell him this. He says he can prove legally he is Jovan's father. Tell him how he can do this. Keith just tell me. Can he truly prove that? What highhandedness does prevail here?” Keith rose from his chair, hugged me tight. “None can take our Jovan from

us. He is our son. Calm down.” After I got normal he read the whole text from the computer. He sat thinking for some time. I shook him.” What are you thinking, Keith?”

“Oh my poor...”

A current of fear swam through my body. “Who? Jovan?”

“Oh no, Shamsheer.” Saying this Keith again hugged me to him. “Yes! He can demand the DNA test. But my fear is not that he will take Jovan saying that he is his son...”

I don’t know from where this idea came to my mind that if Keith had been the real father of Jovan would this fear not have gripped him? I said, “Really! Is this matter not a cause of fear for you?”

Our main worry was what effect it would have on Jovan’s mind. We had never spoken to him on this issue. Now, he was too young for these matters. Let’s consider what to do? The realisation that Keith had no fear of someone laying claim over Jovan wrecked my mind. It seemed, Keith would surely take this matter with the seriousness it demanded. I thought Keith could never be able to bear this kind of catastrophe. Whenever Jovan received any injury, he took it to him too much. Just a few months before, Jovan sprained his ankle playing ice hockey. Keith would not let Jovan land his foot on the ground. He would always keep him piggybacked astride his shoulders.

Keith said, “Let us tell Shamsheer the truth. Let us write to him that this is not the proper time to disclose the fact to the child. It will make an adverse effect on him. When he is eighteen or more, we may let him know of it. At that time, he would be able to bear with this fact. Till then, Shamsheer should keep patience.”

“What enmity he has with me, tell me Keith? Why again and again he poisons my life.”

Keith took my hand and pressed it. I had never thought that this would happen to me. I had always thought that he had come into my life like a bad dream. But why he has suddenly come back again in my life. I was afraid he might also have been to Jovan’s school. The very thought shuddered me.

“Why are you so afraid? He is sitting three thousand kilometers away from the school.”

“Maybe he has come here. Keith let us go to the school immediately”

“What has happened to you, Sim? Don’t be afraid. Wash your face and hands. See what have you done to yourself crying like this. I am going to take Jovan home. It is time the school closes.”

After reassuring, Keith went to the school to drive Jovan home. When they got home I hugged Jovan. When I loosened my grip he said, “Mom you would have broken my bones.”

Keith cut celery, carrots and broccoli and put them before Jovan and said, ‘Now you eat this after that we’ll do homework.’ Then he began to wash the Jovan’s lunch box taking its sections out. I thought that Jovan would never agree to go to Shamsher. Then at once, the thought of Greg and Leslie’s children came to my mind.

Leslie was a nurse like me and Keith in the extended care unit of the hospital. That day, there was potluck at Leslie’s house. Leslie the chatterbox that she was, was engaged in talking nonstop with someone as if she were attending potluck in some other person’s house. Leslie’s husband, Greg, was grilling hotdogs and offering to guests. Also, he was wiping the mouths of the children from eating. Sometime, he would go to ask the guests if they needed anything. Keith walked over and stood before him. I followed. “Greg Please let me help you.”

“It is pleasure to take care of the children.” Greg said, “Your child is very gentle.”

“Yes. He is. He has gone after his Daddy”. I said hinting towards Keith with my hand. A child came to Greg and said, “Dad, could I take one more coke?”

“No son! You have already taken too much. Now you play,” said Greg. After the child was gone, he said, “He lives with her mom. He comes to me only Saturdays and Sundays. He thinks, here, he would have all the freedom of eating anything he wants. His mom is very strict so far food is concerned. She doesn’t let him take fast food. Greg offering his hand said to his son, “Take a bite from this.”

The child said, “Dad can I take coke.”

“No, first have a munch of this and then take your milk.”

“I am angry with you, Greg,” the child said putting on a frown on his face. He was besides with laughter.

I pinched the cheek of the child with warmth and said, “Naughty boy, you should not call your dad by name.”

The child said, “Greg is not my dad. I have my own dad.”

I was wonderstruck. I didn’t know that the child was from the former husband of Leslie. But his calling Greg by name seemed very odd to me. Leslie told me that Greg took much care of the child. One day, I asked Leslie at work, “Don’t you mind your son calling Greg by his name. How would their mutual relation grow?”

“The child can’t call two men his dads. He has his own dad then why should he call Greg his dad? His dad meets with him every week and he also gives him pocket money too.”

I could never imagine Jovan calling Keith by his name. That day, Jovan had said returning from Leslie’s house, “How foolish of that child, to call his dad by his name.”

“Greg is his step father, the words slipped from my mouth.”

“Even so, dad is dad,” Jovan said and I took him in my embrace.

Jovan’s these words had not come to my mind. Had they been, it would have given me consolation momentarily. What had stuck my mind was what would happen if Shamsheer did not agree. What would then happen if Jovan would start going to Shamsheer for some days. Thinking of this, my eyes filled with tears.

“Keith where are you? Please come here.”

“I am here dear.”

“No come in front of me, Keith.”

Jovan was doing his school work sitting at the dinner table. Keith sat by his side. Keith came to the family room where I was.

“Mom what is the matter?” Jovan had followed Keith.

“Your mom doesn’t feel good. First you do your home work then you may play.”

“What is the matter mom? Don’t you feel good?”

I got up and took him in my arms. What could I say my pain was? Keith said, “It is just headache. You will get well soon. Take Advil. Jovan go bring some water for mom.”

As soon as Jovan was gone, Keith said, "Sim, take care. Nothing will happen. Let's not talk in front of Jovan. If you say, I may bring a sleeping pill. Good sleep would get you right."

But I refused. Jovan set down to do his homework, quietly. It began to go silent around. If Jovan went to live with Shamsheer when he is grown up? What would then we have? We do not have any other child. Such thoughts kept coming to me.

Sometimes, we would think about having another child but every time Keith would advise to adopt a child instead. Once, I told him that the child should be of us both.

He said instantly, "Is Jovan not of both of us?"

I tried to put the matter in proper context and said, "This is only yours. I work on night shifts. It is you who have been taking care of him and changing diapers."

"I understand what you mean, Sim. You mean the child from our sperm. But, Sim, the bond of love is stronger than that of blood."

To me, these words of Keith appeared to be just theoretical. Fear overcame me. I began to think, if our son got attracted to Keith more, maybe he would give more attention to the child from his own sperm. This way, Jovan's love would get divided. Then I thought since Jovan was there, what was the need of having another child? Thinking of this, I put my leg on Keith. After some time, Jovan's voice was heard. "Dad! I am not getting sleep."

I said, "I am coming to you, my child." Getting my head off from under his arm over the pillow, Keith got up, and opened the door. He took Jovan in his arms. He hugged him and began to tap on his back. I came to the door adjusting my nightie. Keith said, "What is the matter, son?"

"I couldn't get sleep."

"I had put you to sleep."

"It came, and then it went."

"Let me sleep with you," I said.

"No dad will."

I pulled Jovan to me, lovingly. He reached my ear, and said slowly, "We have blood relation that's why."

“Okay Okay.” I said this and gave him another pat another with my hand.

I said unwittingly, “Penguin.”

That night, we had gone to bed after watching a documentary about penguins. The film showed how a female penguin handing her eggs to the male penguin to guard goes to the sea in search of food and the male penguin keeps them warm tucking them close to his belly for 22-23 days on end, all the while standing at the same spot bearing the cold and strong winds. When the fledglings get out of the egg, the male hands them over to the female and the male goes in search of food. Some penguins get so much sick standing in the harsh winter because of hunger that they can’t even make to the sea for foraging for food.

That night, after my calling Keith the penguin, I had mused that Keith didn’t have even blood relation with the eggs, that the male penguin in the documentary had, which was why the male kept the eggs tucked to his belly. So, it seemed comparing Keith to a male penguin didn’t quite suit.

Just some days after this incident, Keith, again, seemed to me like a penguin. The reason for it that day was not only his mind but his dress as well. We were getting ready to go for a party. Keith and Jovan had put on black suits with white shirts on. I was busy readying myself for the party. They both, father and son, were waiting. Keith had got ready after dressing Jovan for the occasion. And they were watching a TV show about the Penguins. They both looked like penguins. I told them so naughtily. I said, “If you had put on orange bow ties you would just look like penguins. Saying this I was beside myself with love for Keith. I wanted to put a tight embrace around Keith, but instead, I took Jovan to my heart. He said trying to appear angry, “You call us penguins.”

“No son, I don’t call you that. I call your daddy a penguin.”

Saying this, I looked at Keith, love brimming my eyes.

He smiled.

“If dad is penguin then I am also penguin.”

“My dad was also a penguin.” Keith said.

I could not understand why he said so. I glanced at him quizzically.

He said, "My dad's favorite ice hockey team is Pittsburgh Penguins. And mine too."

"And mine too," said Jovan.

And just ten days after that on the 10<sup>th</sup> birthday of Jovan we had all become penguins. Keith's daddy, Peter and Terra had also come from the Iceland. In fact, the whole party was arranged by them. They had also arranged ice rink. We all had put on the Pittsburgh Penguins jerseys. The cake too had on it the team's logo. Napkins, paper plates all had on them the images of penguins. Before cutting the cake, we all started skating. Then, we started playing hockey. On one side, were mum, dad, Keith and Jovan, and on the other, were Jovan's five friends. Mum was the goal keeper. Dad the stopper, Keith and Jovan the attackers. I had never learnt skating. Standing outside, I kept on watching them play.

At the Jovan's skating class, I would always keep standing like that but Keith would put on his skates. Jovan had starting playing hockey after learning skating. Mostly Keith would take him to practices. If I had an off from work, and Keith were on work, then I would take Jovan along. I would feel cold and would sit in the waiting room on the first floor, and watch Jovan play. But Keith would all the time keep circling around Jovan guiding and encouraging him on and on.

Playing the game, Dad would give pass to Keith and Keith would give pass to Jovan and goad him to score the goal. And when Jovan scored a goal through the legs of the goalkeeper he would start dancing with elation. Doing this, his ankle had sprained. Dad took Jovan in his lap and brought him outside and sat by his bed for two days. The day they had to go back to Iceland Jovan's eyes were moist. He said, "Grandpa stay here more with us."

Some days after they had gone, Jovan said, 'Mum my friends are queer. See what they ask me. They say are your grandpa and grandma real?' and then, he said, "Your family is strange. Grandma and Grandpa and Dad are white and we both are brown."

“What is strange in it? Your Nani and Nana are also brown”, I said.

“Yes, that is why I said that my friends are silly,” Jovan said.

Then he stopped and said, “Mum do you know what is the real matter. We are penguin’s family. We keep care of each other. I love my family very much.”

Jovan’s these words didn’t come to my mind. Maybe these should have given some relief to my depressed mind. Dreadful ideas came again and again to my mind. If Jovan were to come to know who his real father was then what would happen? The children can any time be won over to one’s side giving them some lollypop. This idea began ringing in my mind. I kept holding Keith’s hand. I squeezed my hand and said, “Don’t worry.” But my uneasiness was growing. I wanted to ask if Shamsher didn’t agree what we would then do? But Jovan was present there. We can’t discuss this in his presence. I said, “Jovan go play with your X-box.”

“There should be a player to play with.”

“You play fruit Ninja game. I’ll come after some time.”

“Okay I will sit with you, here.”

“Don’t keep standing on your dad’s shoulders. Leave him alone for some time.” I spurted.

Keith again squeezed my hand and said, “Stay calm.”

Jovan went a little disappointed. I again could not keep myself from weeping. “Keith, what would happen?”

“How all of a sudden love for Jovan has sprung in Shamsher?”

“What we can say? In his profile, only three daughters of his family are shown. Maybe he may have some regret.”

“Regret of ruining others’ families.”

“Nothing is going to happen. You are unnecessarily worried. First, he will come to some understanding. Second, the legal system is not so much cruel. They will see through everything before deciding the either way. They would do whatever is in the real interest of the child.”

“Will you have no objection if Shamsher gets agreed? Will we hand over Jovan right away after raising him so well, so lovingly?”

“Anyway, we are not going to give Jovan to him. We’ll just tell Jovan the whole story when he gets of age.”

If Jovan went to even him, then?”

“Then, there must have been some lack in our raising of him.”

A sharp question arose in my mind that if Jovan were Keith’s own child, had his reaction would have been like it was now? But I didn’t bring this thing upto my lips. I kept mum. Why did this kind of upheaval rose in my heart? Why Keith didn’t have any such kind emotion. It was my desire that my brain should become stunned and nothing should come into it. It seemed, everything was about to be ruined for me. Seeing Jovan not around, I became nervous. I got up and went to him. He had gone to his room leaving his game. He said, “Mom you should have taken rest in your bed.” But I had no rest. Seeing Jovan not before my eyes tugged my heart. I wanted to sleep with him during the night but he would not agree. When Keith said that we all would sleep together in the family room, he agreed. I put him between myself and Keith. I wanted to hug him but he was slipping farther and farther away. “Am I a baby?” He would say again and again. Still my unease didn’t go. Keith brought me a sleeping pill. I don’t know when I went to sleep. When in the morning, I opened my eyes both the corners of my eyes were moist. My mouth had flown saliva. I was shocked.

Ten or eleven years before, the same thing had happened to me. Suddenly, Shamsheer’s one letter had lit up the flames all around me. At that time, the whole family had started to singe with that fire, and I was dumbfounded.

We all the family were trying to go to the airport. I wished that all others would have some work to attend, and only I would go to the airport to receive Shamsheer. It was my desire that he should hug me close to him right at the airport. And then, coming home in the car, he should be sitting next to me with windows of the car all open. My hair would be flowing in the wind and coming over shading my face again and again. Shamsheer should only keep looking nonstop at me. Shamsheer’s first day in Vancouver I had visualized happening like that. I had been looking for full five months for this dream to materialize. And when I came to know that I was

pregnant my dream grew bigger. I thought Shamsher would put his hand upon my belly and would keep looking at me. I was absorbed in thinking which suit I would put on that day. What shade of lipstick would match my suit? And much more like that I kept on musing. Now that day had at long last arrived. Just only one phone had shattered my cherished dream. Somebody had told papa that instead of coming to Vancouver Shamsher had landed in Toronto. The rest of the thing would, he said, be known from the letter coming the very next day.

In the letter, which I got the next day contained a photo too. Mine and that of the son of the Bhua of my brother-in-law. I had never met that fellow. In the letter, it was written: You would think I have deceived you. But you don't have any idea how we have been suffering for the past full five months the way that fellow has deceived us. On the day of marriage, that rascal had come to our house with four ruffians. He said that Simran loved him only. That ours was a forced marriage. For proof, he showed this photo to us. You can't imagine what was the condition of our heart at that time. There were guests in the house. If we let them know it could surely have put us to great shame. Anyhow, with much difficulty we drove those hooligans out of our house. Only I know how much internal struggle I had to wage to get married with Simran. It seemed to me that I would control myself but the day he congratulated me over the phone with the news that Simran was pregnant, it looked he was speaking the truth, otherwise how could he have any inkling of Simran being pregnant before me. He said the child was his. What face we would show to the world. I have nothing to do with her. Get your daughter married somewhere else wherever she desires."

The whole household was immersed in shock. All in the family read that letter one by one passing it on to each other. When I read the letter, I got stunned. I didn't remember what others had said. I still remember the things said by my mom and dad. Papa was saying, "what lawlessness was that? How they could do this? Such a big deceit!" And then, he said after a while, "They should talk with us. We would tell them what the real matter was."

“Even now there is time to set things right. It is never too late to do that. Let us let them know the whole position. These days there are so many tests on the market. Let them remove their doubts if any.”

Hearing these words of Bibi ji, I was got too much upset.

I also had by then known that all that mischief was the creation of my elder brother-in law. He wanted my marriage with his Bhua’s son but he was no match for me from any angle. He was alcoholic. None in the family wanted this marriage to take place. Jijaji had become annoyed. The news of my pregnancy he also must have got from my sister.

More than jijaji, I was angry with Shamsheer. The thing that pained me most was that all his expression of love for me was just drama, a hoax he played with me for full five months. Why he didn’t get his doubt cleared from me? Why did he play with my life?

At least he shouldn’t have made me pregnant. One night, I had dreamed with him that we’d become mom and dad only after we would have our own house. “Home is made just with marrying. If we have a child I don’t have any difficulty at immigration. I think you should go to Canada till I get a visa. But when I think of living without you, my heart sinks.” Soaked in his love for me, I had agreed to have unprotected sex with him. I stayed excited and full of euphoria remembering his loving words. Even after I reached here, he would keep me happy with his loving words over the phone.

After his deceit, those very words started to burn a hole in my mind. I felt cheated, robbed of my reality. All my family thought like this. Papa would try to relieve himself of this scourge saying, “Such a naked deceit with us? I will rest only after he is shunted back to India.”

Biji would say, “Would that be of any worth? Our daughter will not get her honour back.”

The words ‘disgraced our daughter’ would cut me deep from my inside. All around me, I felt utter dark. What would I do all alone here? How would I raise singly my child? Sometimes, I thought of getting my pregnancy terminated. Sometimes I thought that after

giving birth to the child, I should leave him in some hospital. All these thoughts made me suffer even more. Sometimes I visualised Shamsher in handcuffs sitting in the aeroplane. This thought would give me some relief. But it was short-lived. I would rather see myself dangling in the air rather than Shamsher. Tears would flow nonstop from my eyes. Keith would wipe my unruly tears. He would say, "You should rather feel happy that at least you are now free from such a wretched fellow."

I felt these words of Keith were just meant to give me temporary cheer. But no, these could only have come from the depth of Keith's heart. I was gaining full sense of these, slowly. My and Keith's shift of work would be the same. Only when we started living together, we had changed our shifts for the sake of the upbringing of Jovan.

Earlier, it was always a pleasure to having small talk sitting together. He had asked me a number of times to have coffee together somewhere outside, some time. But I kept my control. I knew Papa would never agree with my marriage with any one from a different race like Keith. And when I told him that I was going to India for getting married he had said how lucky would the person be I was going to marry.

And now ditched by that very 'lucky person', I saw the dark spread all around me. Keith said, "You should now devote yourself wholly to raising of your child forgetting all that happened. Try to keep yourself happy."

Be happy for what? Only dark I saw all around. What should I do of this child? Sometimes, I thought that I should... and I could not help bringing to say that which I could never dare to utter before even my Bibiji. Deeply hurt, Keith said, "Are you mad! Don't even think of this foolish thing again, never." Then he squeezed my hand and said, "Forgive me! Before I said this, I should have understood the state of shock you have been through. But pray! Don't think like this about the child. I would raise him after adopting him."

He kept on giving many assurances. Then, he stood up and said, "Please do keep good care of my child."

With the child, I too had become Keith's. For my family, too, he had proved himself to be the true upholder of my grace. He was the same Keith with whom my marriage had seemed a total a disgrace of my Dad's turban. But now, I was deserted by the husband and also got pregnant by him. Keith had taken me out from the abyss giving me a hand. Now it seemed Shamsher was bent upon to push us back to another kind of ditch. How he had the temerity to say in the Facebook to meet with Jovan in the school. To get out of the shock of this sad insult, the very next day Keith had chalked out a program to go for vacations at far off place like the Grouse Mountain. All the day out there in the winter, we would frolic about with snow. We three would make a house of snow.

That day, my heart was still heavy. I didn't want to do anything. Keith and Jovan had tried to hold my arm for ice skating. But I had refused to play and had gone into the building and sat by the window. They both were busy making snow homes. Then all of sudden that boy had come hither snowboarding. He had come and gone but he had put me in turmoil again. I wanted both Keith and Jovan to come near me. They had too much of play to them by now. They should avoid getting hurt.

I called them to me. "Now come in on." Keith had, perhaps, recognised the tremor in my voice. He came in promptly. As soon as he entered, I said, "I was afraid that that boy should not come hither and hit you again and destroy the house you made with so much labour of love."

"Damn him who would do that. Our home is not that fragile to be run down like that. We have sunk its foundations very deep and strong."

Keith's words gave me respite. I said, "You said last night that Jovan will not go to Shamsher. How do you say that?"

"Have I ever talked of my biological parents? My example is right before you."

I kept looking at him for some time. Then I said, "Have you never felt a desire to make a search for them?"

"My upbringers" love has not left any ground for me to do that," saying this, Keith took my hand and said, "Come let's help Jovan in making his home."

I followed him.

## **Priscila Uppal**

### **Let It Run**

*A Play in One Act*

**Alexandra:** 23 years-old; elite athlete (rower)

**Sundeep/Jason/Father/Coach:** played by same actor: there should be hints of similarities between all the characters, sometimes as if the characters themselves are aware they are playing someone else's role as well as their own; Sundeep is Alex's older brother; Jason is Alex's boyfriend; Father is South-Asian immigrant; Coach is Alex's rowing coach

**Mother/Mrs. Flemming:** played by same actor; these characters should look almost identical; Mother is white Canadian; Mrs. Flemming is a small town shop-owner

**Setting:** Now. West coast, Canada.

**Staging:** A rowing machine, facing the audience, occupies the middle of the stage. Other sports equipment (the weight machine, rings, Exerball, skipping rope, gym mats) should be used throughout the performance to act out the story (for instance, the rowing machine as a bed; the weight bench as a chair). The mood of the play is elegiac; however, the action of the play should be dynamic. Characters not indicated as speaking in a scene can occupy the stage, like ghosts, aware or unaware of the audience.

**Music:** Transitional music should include the sound of water. All music should be spare, somber.

## SCENE ONE

**Alex:** [On the rowing machine, facing the audience, using the machine for at least 30 seconds before speaking.]

I can do this for hours. My arms sometimes get tired, but not my mind, not my heart. [Another thirty seconds before speaking.]

The rhythm comforts me. It's regularity. Reliability. I do this—I get here. I keep doing this—I get there. I do this more efficiently—I get there more quickly and with less effort. What joy. You might think I'm kidding, I'm not. Ask any rower. *What saves us is efficiency. The devotion to efficiency.*

[Another 30 seconds.]

I've qualified for the Olympics. People think that's pretty cool. I do too. I came in fourth at the Worlds. And my coach thinks I'm nowhere near my potential. Strange phrase. Nobody likes to think they're anywhere near their potential—but I've seen people who have reached their potential, and I've seen people who are past it. Not just rowers. I don't ever want to stop. That way, I know is death.

## SCENE TWO

**Alex:** [*Alex transitions to a skipping rope in this scene. This is a memory-scene of a conversation that took place when she was fourteen years-old.*] And Mother says to me: I want you to know that I plan on honoring Sundeep's memory...

**Mother:** But I'm equally aware you are still alive...

**Alex:** Am I?

**Mother:** And your needs deserve my attention. Sundeep would have wanted me to focus...

**Alex:** We don't know...

**Mother:** ...on you...

**Alex:** ...anything about what the dead want. They're dead!

**Mother:** Sundeep told me—

**Alex:** Who cares?

**Mother:** He's your brother.

**Alex:** He *was* my brother.

**Mother:** He told me—

**Alex:** And we can't check with him if he really meant it.

**Mother:** Listen, Alexandra, listen to me, he—

**Alex:** —was sick. Dying. Maybe he was lying.

**Mother:** He knew he was dying so you have to believe what he said.

**Alex:** No.

**Mother:** Listen.

**Alex:** All this talk is meaningless. He didn't look like my brother... he didn't sound like my brother, the one who was always teasing... hurry up, hurry up, the one I was always catching up with... he had thinned out to a crease on a bed, he had petrified to a halt, I was already leagues and leagues past him.

**Mother:** That's cruel, Alex. One day you'll want to know.

**Alex:** No, I won't.

**Mother:** You will.

**Alex:** So tell me *then*.

**Mother:** I might not be around.

**Alex:** You plan on dying too?

**Mother:** We all must plan on dying someday.

**Alex:** Not me. I'm planning on living.

**Mother:** Sundeep is still alive in our hearts—

**Alex:** Let's see how far our hearts take us, Mother. Let's just see. [Beat.] I was wearing my now usual too-depressed-to-go-out-or-to-care-what-I-look-like jogging pants, T-shirt and sneakers, and I bolted out the door past our apple and peach trees down the long, winding road to town—the pebbles attacked my feet—I stamped them like they were responsible—past fields, orchards, wineries, gravel pits, past cows and horses, chicken pens, finally to where the clothing stores and deli and bicycles and cars were, to main street—shoppers parted as I ran by—breathing heavily, a burning ache in my throat... I was determined not to stop. [Beat. *Stop skipping.*] But, the body is weak. People think athletes are proud of how strong the body is—how powerful, invincible—but it's the opposite that's true—like most things I suppose: hate is a form of

love; over-eating a form of hunger; laughter a form of grief. Athletes know how little it takes to undermine the body, set it off course, harm it, and how much, how fucking much diligence and discipline and narrowmindedness and just plain luck is required simply to keep it at its current level of functioning, let alone improve its efficiency. *[Alex collapses onto a mat on her back.]* I had been running for nearly two hours. I collapsed. I was 14 and had run a half-marathon, but collapsed in front of the bank. Mrs. Flemming, from the pastry shop ran over...

**Mrs. Flemming:** Alex, Alex, oh shit, Alex...

**Alex:** Mrs. Flemming was fond of Sundeep, always slipping an extra chocolate croissant or blueberry muffin into his knapsack if he dropped in to pick up our parents' weekly bread and banana cake order. Sundeep had that effect on women. I used to follow my big brother everywhere. But I wasn't the only girl trying to catch up with him. Where are you going? I'd ask, always out of breath, running to catch up. Where are you going?

**Mrs. Flemming:** Alex, Alex, come on, dear, come back...

**Alex:** Sometimes he'd just laugh and let me follow along, never slowing down, hurry, hurry, hurry or I might disappear, he'd taunt. And sometimes he would turn the question back at me: Where are *you* going? Anywhere, I'd tell him. Anywhere, as long as it's with you. You don't want to go anywhere, he'd scold. You want to go somewhere. Anywhere, I'd scream back, with glee. Anywhere. With you.

**Mrs. Flemming:** Alex!

**Alex:** Sundeep radiated joy, no matter what he was doing. It's what I love, I mean, loved, about him too. My brother always looked like life itself was *his* element. Like he was going to go far.

**Mrs. Flemming:** There we go...thank god, thank god, don't move...What's wrong, Alex? Are you sick? My god, has there been an accident? Do you remember what happened before you fell?

**Alex:** Poor Mrs. Flemming. She must have been terrified that the other Binder child had just dropped dead—two dead siblings in less than six months—who could stand it? I wonder if my mother could,

with her belief the dead still feel, think, love. Watch over us. Live in our hearts. She used to say: Sundeep is here. By the window. Now in front of the television. Eating peaches from the orchard. Don't throw those pits on the floor, young man. He's telling me a joke: It's a good one. I'll repeat it: "How many Canadians does it take to change a light bulb?...None. Canadians don't change light bulbs, we accept them as they are." And she'd laugh. Then burst into tears. *[To Mrs. Flemming:]* I was running, but I wasn't getting anywhere... *[Back to audience:]* My mother unfolds and refolds his clothes every Friday. She buys his favourite cereal, Frosted Mini-wheats, and eats it alone, without milk, in the basement. She doesn't know I know these things. *[Back to Mrs. Flemming:]* Why are you crying?

**Mrs. Flemming:** You're in front of the bank, across from my store. You know where that is, right? Do you know who I am?

**Alex:** She was cradling my neck and head, stroking my hair, like a mother would—or like a certain mother would—and then I think she said something about the bank teller calling my parents—that they should be here shortly.

**Mrs. Flemming:** Are you in pain? Where? Where does it hurt? Did you run all the way from home? Why that's....

**Alex:** I didn't think I was hurt. Not physically. Or not exactly physically. But I was sore and a deep sadness like an internal swelling rose up like a tide from my toes to my mouth. Water, I cried. Water.

**Mrs. Flemming:** Yes, water. Water!

**Alex:** The earth is shit.

**Mrs. Flemming:** Try not to talk, dear.

**Alex:** A bank teller brought out a jug. I drank it down as quickly as I could. Then I threw up. Then I drank more and kept it down. But it wasn't enough. I wanted more water. I wanted my hair and eyes, my spleen, my heart, all to be water. I wanted the whole world's water for myself.

### SCENE THREE

**Alex:** [*Alex switches to weight equipment with bench.*] I spent the whole next day in bed, drinking my father's pride—peach juice from our orchard. My mother wanted to take me to the hospital, but I refused. Haven't you spent enough time there? She didn't leave my side all night or morning. I could feel her wanting to empty me. Finally, I said: I'm joining the rowing club.

**Mother:** You're going to rest.

**Alex:** Time to rest when you're dead. That's what dad says.

**Mother:** That's what your father *used* to say.

**Alex:** So now I say it. I'm *joining* the rowing club.

**Mother:** The rowing club? Just like that. We don't have that kind of money. Rowing lessons cost a lot of money...

**Alex:** Ask Dad. He'll pay.

**Mother:** Where is this coming from? Understand, we don't have money right now to waste on passing interests. We're still paying for all the...the...we don't...

**Alex:** Specialists? Medicine? Funeral expenses? Now there'll be rowing club expenses.

**Mother:** You're a selfish little girl.

**Alex:** No, I'm a selfish young woman.

**Mother:** You want us to pay for what happened, don't you? It wasn't our fault. Your father and I did everything we could. It wasn't in our power to save him. You know we tried every treatment, every experimental drug, I learned to cook all kinds of new food. He was riddled with disease and nothing made him better. I watched my first born son die, you have no idea...

**Alex:** I want rowing lessons. That's all. This has nothing to do with Sundeep. [Beat.] I was right. Father agreed to pay. Right away. I went down to the harbour and signed up for lessons twice a week, then four times a week. I am what Coach calls 'a natural.' I practiced hard. Improved quickly. I wanted to see how I compared to other rowers. I raced. I won my age category. Then they let me race in the older category. I came in 3<sup>rd</sup>. Then 2<sup>nd</sup>. Then 1<sup>st</sup>. I was now at the club every day, after school, on weekends. During the

day, I thought of little else. In English class, I wrote poems about rowing. I quoted *Heart of Darkness*...*the voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother*. In Math class, I collated calories with kilojoules, and the seconds I needed to shave off my time. In physics class, I designed the ultimate oars.[Beat.] I think my father was relieved I wasn't in the house. Like he'd never had children at all. Only peaches. He admired my drive from a distance, collected my ribbons and medals in the same suitcase he packed all his wishes inside when he boarded for Canada, and paid the bills. But I was now outside his reach, loved but untouchable, like Sundeep. [Beat.] Next thing I knew, five years had passed. The peaches were ripe again. I was a university student. Then I fell in love.

#### SCENE FOUR

**Alex:** His name: Jason. I think at first it was his name I liked. Jason of the Argonauts. And the fact that when the professor asked us to list our favourite books *Heart of Darkness* was at the top of his list. Sundeep had given me my copy for my thirteenth birthday—he'd stolen it in high school. I'd read it, written poems out of it, even named my scull Kurtz. But I didn't understand it. Not in the least. And Jason also liked to tell jokes.

**Jason:** An American couple cross the border for a vacation and get lost. They pull over a pedestrian and ask for directions. "Can you tell us where we are?" The pedestrian smiles and says, "Saskatoon, Saskatchewan." They keep driving, hoping to find someone who understands English.

**Alex:** So, his name, his favourite book, because he made me laugh, and his cute ass. [*Jason should be measuring Alex's head to start this scene, as a nod to Conrad. Then they should be very sexually playful, using rings equipment*] Plus, he chased me. He wasn't afraid of my medals or my muscles like lots of the other guys. He was into literature and philosophy and mythology and music...oh yes, and fucking. He loved fucking.

**Jason:** I have to admit, it's a real turn on to be fucking an Olympian.

**Alex:** I thought you loved me for my mind. Besides, I'm not an Olympian. Not yet.

**Jason:** Ok, it's a real turn on to be fucking a future Olympian.

**Alex:** Might not happen.

**Jason:** Oh, you'll make the Olympics.

**Alex:** Certainly, but we might not be fucking then.

**Jason:** That's not nice.

**Alex:** It's true.

**Jason:** Well, it's also true that we're fucking now.

**Alex:** Yes.

**Jason:** I'm as good a fit as your scull!

**Alex:** Kurtz. His name is Kurtz.

**Jason:** I'm just as polished, and slick, and durable...

**Alex:** You're jealous of Kurtz.

**Jason:** Not at all. Are you jealous of snowboarders or cyclists? We're in different competitions here. But we do need to pinpoint what we're training for.

**Alex:** Death.

**Jason:** You're so morbid. Usually, I like that. But, *I* say we're training for life.

**Alex:** We'll see who wins, won't we?

**Jason:** In the meantime, I think we should apply ourselves...dedicate ourselves to train much harder...

**Alex:** faster...

**Jason:** set clear goals...

**Alex:** with measurable results...

**Jason:** we'll time each other...

**Alex:** and award medals...

**Jason:** I know where I want to pin yours....

**Alex:** And we did practice. A lot. I used to be afraid of sex, afraid it would take me *outside* my body. Into the body of another. I like being inside my own body. I'm safe there. I know my body inside out, like I know my scull. How many seconds I lose if my foot is positioned at the wrong angle, if my wrists don't grip the oars with the right amount of tension—my lungs react to the slightest alteration in humidity—I know how much a piece of chocolate

cake or ill-advised third pint of beer will add to the scale. We go everywhere together, me and my body, even if sometimes I have to catch up with it. I don't ride double. Coach is always on my case about that.

**Coach:** You're not a team player, Alex. That's your choice, but you could compete in more races, make a bigger impact on this club if you'd race in doubles or fours, an eight? You have excellent timing, and balance, your oaring technique is almost perfect, it wouldn't be hard for you to learn to oar in unison. How to take directions. We could try out pairs first. See if you mesh with one of the most experienced girls or, or you mentor, shape and mould one of the younger ones, like a big sister. But you won't will you? You're out there on your own, right? [Beat.] Out there with no one I can see, and no one you can see either, I bet. You might tell yourself you're rowing for someone else, but you're not. We both know that's bullshit. You don't have the heart for it.

**Alex:** I don't need a heart to row.

**Coach:** No, you're evidence of that. You need strength and discipline...

**Alex:** A devotion to efficiency.

**Coach:** ...which you have in spades. You're my best rower, no question. But I have a heart and mine's greedy. I want more. You haven't reached your potential. I can see...

**Alex:** What I can become? How far I can go? No one can see that. And you can't see what's inside my heart either.

**Coach:** Even if you don't need a heart to row, you need one to live.

**Alex:** You need to protect your heart to live, Coach.

**Coach:** Sometimes. But sometimes you need to open it so it can breathe.

**Alex:** *[Alex should run on a treadmill now. Fast.]* So, I opened my heart. I wasn't used to exercising that particular muscle, not since I said goodbye to my brother, which was months before his lifeline went flat, when he still somewhat looked like and sounded somewhat like and acted somewhat like my brother, not some hull of a body filled to the brim with cancer cells, unable to eat solid

food or go to the washroom on his own. He had become still, inert, and I couldn't forgive him for that. I wanted him moving, always moving. Eighteen, and over and done with. I remembered chasing him out to the ocean, how he'd jump off the dock without any hesitation, down into the dark layers of the water. He'd swim out and out, further each time. I couldn't track him. For nearly a minute I wouldn't be able to find him. Like he'd disappeared. I'd get scared sometimes that he'd held his breath too long and passed out, or some snake bit his leg and he'd sunk. I always watched him, scared, but I loved him most then too, anticipating his reemergence, long arms so brown and shiny in the sun and in the wetness like a sea lion flirting with the tide. My heart was used to working then. And then it stopped. *[Alex should slow down now, but effort should increase.]* The heart can get slack and unfit without exercise. I hadn't noticed how much my heart had suffered. Sex with Jason was helping. But he was more like a piece of equipment at first than a part of me.

**Jason:** What do American beer and sex in a rowboat have in common? [Beat.] They're both so close to water...

**Alex:** My heart was sore. I let it love only a little at a time.

**Jason:** How did the blonde injure herself playing with the Toronto Maple Leafs? [Beat.] She fell out of the tree.

**Alex:** Gradually, my heart built stamina. Jason's body became almost, almost...

**Jason:** In Vancouver, what do you call it after two days of rain? [Beat.] Monday.

**Alex:** My heart raced. It ran. It was gaining confidence I would win. I moved my hips, my fingernails, my tongue, in rhythm. I sometimes forgot I wasn't on the water waiting for my brother to break the surface and shoot up his shiny arms. He called me sensual. Me? Sensual? And there I was all filled up with him and not as scared...

**Jason:** Sensual...

**Alex:** Sensual.

**Jason:** Are you ever afraid of the water?

**Alex:** Is that a joke?

**Jason:** No, it's a question. You should be able to tell the difference.

**Alex:** Of the water?

**Jason:** Yeah, of, let's say, capsizing...

**Alex:** I can roll back up in seconds, it's not a big...

**Jason:** drowning...

**Alex:** ...deal, unless it's in a race, then you're disqualified.

**Jason:** Are you ever afraid of drowning?

**Alex:** Nobody drowns during a race.

**Jason:** But when you're training. Alone. I know you train alone. All the time. No life jacket.

**Alex:** A life jacket's a prop for people like me.

**Jason:** Most people are afraid of drowning.

**Alex:** It's never occurred to me.

**Jason:** I don't believe you.

**Alex:** OK. It has occurred to me. But I'm not afraid. Most of the time, I don't think about it. Water's a fact. It can be cold, warm, but mostly cold. I respect it, because it covers the earth. Three-quarters of the earth. And there is more life sprouting and spawning and swimming deep down in the water than we'll ever know. This planet shouldn't even be called Earth. It should be called Water. I'm not afraid of water. The same way you're not afraid of air. My father is afraid of fire. Worries about the orchard catching fire. But I wouldn't mind dying in water—I wish my... I hope... At least it'll be a clean death.

**Jason:** When I see you out on the water, I realize that even if we're made of water, water can still be deadly.

**Alex:** Sometimes I worry I'm harming the water. As I push off the dock and row from one buoy to another. Sometimes I bring up seaweed. Sometimes small fish. I've smacked trout and salmon, I've smacked eels. But I keep going. I don't care what happens to them. Winter training is the worst. It's so fucking cold out on the water, even in your suit you think you're going to freeze over. You wonder if the water hates you. *[Alex moves to a mat to do sit-ups and push-ups.]*

**Jason:** Whenever I dream about you there's water everywhere. We can talk and eat and fuck and sleep, but we're underwater. Your hair makes this sail behind you, like a mermaid. What do you

dream about?

**Alex:** I don't dream.

**Jason:** Everyone dreams.

**Alex:** I do things. Doing is in real time. I don't know where dreams live or who hears them, so I ignore them.

**Jason:** So, you don't dream.

**Alex:** I don't care about my dreams, because they don't care about me.

**Jason:** That's ridiculous. Your dreams are a part of you.

**Alex:** Not mine. Let me tell you a story. A real story. I had a brother. He died. I don't dream about him. I don't imagine him. I don't know where he is. He's dead; he does nothing. I do things. I see where I am. And I'm strong. Every time my mother dreams about him, she depletes. She does less. And she's less happy—I can vouch for that.

**Jason:** I'm sorry.

**Alex:** Why are you sorry?

**Jason:** You must have nightmares.

**Alex:** No need to imagine nightmares. Before checking into hospital—permanently, we all knew, for endless chemo until his body turned into liquid mush—my brother asked to take a boat ride, a two-hour cruise along the coast with the promise of whale and sea lion sightings. Not once did my parents look at the water. Not even when a group of orca whales sprung up like these grand mythical beasts in picture books. “Look! Look Mom!” I cried. “Dad, look!” They only had eyes for him. The orca whales were strong, free, taunting them. My brother was prey. He said: “I wish I could go out on my own, in a rowboat or something, just me and the whales, but...My Mom even had to tie his shoelaces by then. I don't need to invent nightmares.

**Jason:** So, what are you afraid of?

**Alex:** *[To audience:]* I couldn't help it. Sometimes I would look at Jason and think my warm heart would suddenly turn cold with jealousy. I'd think my Sundeeep never made it to your age—do you think you're more worthy than he? And then I'd think it was unfair—not to Jason, but to Sundeeep—to age him that way.

**Alex:** I'm afraid of what might not be in the water, not what's in it.

## SCENE FIVE

**Alex:** [*Back on the rowing machine.*] My heart was working again, but I couldn't ignore the pain any longer. Coach could see it on my face.

**Coach:** Why don't you just admit it? You're going to make things worse if you continue denying it, and then you'll screw up the healing process.

**Alex:** My left wrist was killing me. I could barely grip my oars without pain shooting up my arm up to my neck. In cross-currents, it was excruciating. Water's heavy. And sometimes it breaks you. My mom told me that. The story of my birth. Why do mothers want to tell you these things? I think we forget our births for a reason, just as I hope we forget our deaths. But mothers, mothers force us to remember. I broke her water. And I rowed right out of her. This is a lie of course. She rewrote the story to suit my rowing life, something she took credit for now—she probably thought the story would bring us closer together. It didn't. My father was in the orchard conversing with his peaches. My mother... I have no idea where she was.

**Coach:** You have a serious stress fracture in your left wrist. And you'll get one in your right too if you don't stop training and rest.

**Alex:** Stop training? But provincials are in two weeks, and then the western finals, and then...

**Coach:** If you don't stop *over*-training...

**Alex:** The only training is over-training....

**Coach:** You are going to do permanent damage.

**Alex:** ...if you want to get somewhere.

**Coach:** I know you're ambitious.

**Alex:** Not the way you think.

**Coach:** You've got drawers full of medals. Your times are stellar this season. But they're not going to stay that way if you don't take care of this injury.

**Alex:** I don't give a shit about medals or times.

**Coach:** Why do you do it then?

**Alex:** I want to get somewhere!

**Coach:** Get yourself into bed and rest.

**Alex:** Don't mistake somewhere for anywhere. Anywhere is random. Meaningless space. Nowhere is the absence of space. But somewhere. Well, somewhere is where life is. I can't quite see it, but I know. I know...

**Coach:** You need rest. You're hurting yourself. You have plenty of places to go. You're young. Don't worry.

**Alex:** There's only one place I care about.

**Coach:** Well, for the next two months that somewhere is home. I'm sure your mother will welcome spending time with you on the couch instead of in the car driving you to practice and races. Injury and rest are part of being an athlete too—you need to learn how to incorporate them into your routines or you'll never go anywhere.

**Alex:** What will I do if I'm not rowing?

**Coach:** Heal.

**Alex:** I don't think I can.

## SCENE SIX

**Alex:** *[Using an Exerball now.]* My mother did enjoy having a little patient to fuss over. Do you realize how many basic actions you need your wrists for?

**Jason:** *[Trying to seduce her. She should be pushing him away.]* I know.

**Alex:** I couldn't pleasure myself, let alone him. For the first time since trying to catch up with my brother, I was clumsy. Mom, can you open this jar for me? I can't turn the shower handle, Mom. Mom, can you get *Heart of Darkness* off that shelf? Mom...Mom...My mom was beside herself with happiness. Finally, a child again. A child all her own. And one she'd help get better, get stronger every day. Injured, not diseased. Just injured. Not a child who would suffer and deteriorate and give her a last kiss, last words to hold on to. She sang, she made preserves, she dusted off our old board games, she even told jokes.

**Mother:** How do you keep bacon from curling in the pan? [Beat.]  
Take away their little brooms.

**Alex:** I was selfish and petulant and pouty. I started to feel young again. And I remembered how much I loved her then, how she was like father's beloved peach trees: sweet, reliable, always growing... I put my arms around her. Mom... Mom... I missed you...

**Mother:** Oh, I missed you too, dear. Isn't this fun? Why don't I paint your toes? Would you like that? Now that you're not in an out of the water all day, I can treat you like a girl again? How about pink? Let's curl your hair.

**Alex:** One night, while she was tucking me in—the nights were calm now, and I'd sleep, sweet dreamless sleep, like I was... well, I was calm, let's just say I was calm—my mother was humming contentedly, putting everything around me in its place, including stray hairs around my face. She was in the happiest trance. And I was happy too. Then she kissed me goodnight and said:

**Mother:** Now I'll just go put Sundeep to bed....

**Alex:** I gasped, but my mother was already out the door on her way to Sundeep's old room, where we now kept planter pots and Christmas decorations, and my trophies and medals and the family photo albums, along with laundry baskets full of his clothes and hockey cards and books. What a shock she would find there, I worried, when Sundeep wasn't there, only our most useless things. The door opened, I could hear her go inside, and a minute later close the door behind her. Where was my mother? Was she with Sundeep? I couldn't sleep. Why didn't I notice before that we lived on different lands, that we were rowing different seas?

## SCENE SEVEN

**Alex:** [*Using hand weights. If possible, use a piece of sports equipment for the television.*] The next week, my teammates were at the Pan-Am games without me. I insisted on watching all the diving competitions. My mother could barely watch—turning away, throwing her hands up, holding her breath, gasping... I laughed. Mom, do you know how rare it is for athletes at this level to hit

their heads on the board or belly-flop?

**Mother:** That American did it—at the Olympics. I remember. What a nightmare. You were too young, maybe.

**Alex:** I've seen clips. He still won gold.

**Mother:** He could have died.

**Alex:** How many dives have we watched today, six, seven dozen?

**Mother:** I suppose.

**Alex:** And how many ended in disaster?

**Mother:** I don't know.

**Alex:** None. None ended in disaster.

**Mother:** You don't know what's going on in their heads or hearts. You don't know if they're hurt inside...I keep thinking to throw yourself off a tower like that...you must be hurt inside...

**Alex:** Look at their eyes after nailing a dive. What joy! They don't know the meaning of the word hurt.

**Mother:** I can't wait for hurdles. Now that I understand. Jumping over obstacles. That's useful, Alex.

**Alex:** Now there's your disaster. Athletes are always smacking those things with their legs, feet, tumbling down head first, taking others with them to the ground. There's nothing you can do about it if a competitor topples into your lane. You were perfect, fast and lithe and strong, but someone else's mistake costs you the race. I'm not sure there's anything more tragic than hurdles.

**Mother:** Only a girl raised in Canada would say that. Hurdles are a privilege.

**Alex:** So is diving.

**Mother:** Diving is spectacle.

**Alex:** What's rowing then?

**Mother:** Rowing is you. I don't always like it, but rowing is you.

**Alex:** Mom, why don't you like rowing?

**Mother:** It takes you away from me. There's the finish line, and yet it's not a finish line. You keep going. You don't stop.

**Alex:** I stop.

**Mother:** You lift your oars and glide at the end, but you don't stop.

**Alex:** You 'let it run.' That's what Coach says when it's time to lift our oars out of the water. 'Let it run.'

**Mother:** You don't let it run.

**Alex:** *[To audience:]* There are times I think I wouldn't care if I ever saw land again—there's purity to water when all that frames it is a horizon—as if your wishes, your dreams, your good memories, could go on forever. Land only reminds me that life grows and life dies. And love, love is nothing to a building, illness nothing to a bridge, my last conversation with Sundeep on that cruise nothing to my father's peaches. But the sea, the sea listens...*[To Mother:]* When I'm rowing, I feel alive.

**Mother:** But you do the same thing over and over again. I'd be bored out of my mind—stroke, stroke, stroke, I'm bored just watching you. You're giving up all other experiences for this...this...

**Alex:** Sport.

**Mother:** You don't go to parties. You don't learn music, painting, dance, woodworking...aside from sports, you don't even watch television or go on chat rooms...I want a regular kid. Isn't it enough that...

**Alex:** One of your kids died? Yes, that's enough. If I were going to parties and text messaging and banging out "chopsticks" on some piano, I'd be dying too. I'm not just doing the same thing over and over again. I'm doing better each time...

**Mother:** And when will you stop? When your wrists break off?

**Alex:** When I see where it takes me.

**Mother:** It takes you away from your family. From me, your father.

**Alex:** I didn't do that.

**Mother:** Yes, you did.

**Alex:** Sundeep did.

**Mother:** Don't you dare talk about your brother that way. He loved you. When he was dying, he said...

**Alex:** You don't think I loved him? I loved him more than anything. More than rowing. But he went away. Elsewhere. And I'm following him...

**Mother:** Listen to him...

**Alex:** Looking for him...

**Mother:** I want to laugh with him...

**Alex:** I want to be his ferryman.

**Mother:** Nobody talks to me anymore. Your father, he's...he's a good man, provided us all a good life. My parents didn't want me to marry someone Indian, so different from us. So handsome, my mother admitted, but he'll take you away from us. And he did. But I loved him. He loves you. He loves Sundeep. He came from India with everything he owned in his pockets, landed himself a sweet Canadian girl, the orchard was prosperous, he was going to run for mayor, what else could a man want? And then...I know you think it's unfair of him to...to withdraw...

**Alex:** I know Dad loves me.

**Mother:** Sundeep's cancer ate his soul. A young death never kills only one person. I wish it had killed me, not your father, not you.

**Alex:** I'm alive, Mom, in case you didn't notice.

**Mother:** You've killed off parts of yourself to do what you do. I'm just trying to collect them, put them in jars, in case you want them again someday. That's who I am now.

**Alex:** You're more than that.

**Mother:** What could be more than that?

## SCENE EIGHT

**Alex:** [*Performing pull-ups.*] Later that day, after diving, equestrian, and indoor cycling, she shuffled off to bed without eating. She'd made my favourite, spaghetti and meatballs—rehab hadn't curbed my appetite, I'd gained a couple of pounds—no one could resist my mother's spaghetti and meatballs, not even my mother, except this night she did. I chalked it up to grief. We lived in grief. It was the air we breathed. At 3 in the morning, I woke to my father screaming:

**Father** [offstage]: Alex! Alex! Call an ambulance! Your mother. She's....call an ambulance!

**Alex:** I cried out—I thought to my father, but no—Sundeep! Sundeep! Come back! Come back! [Beat.] My stupid wrists—I couldn't dial the phone—my father had to do it. I couldn't help lift her onto the stretcher. I couldn't open the door. Such a useless athlete. I watched from the kitchen as they wheeled her out.

**Father:** Stay here...

**Alex:** ...my father insisted.

**Father:** ...so I can call if we need anything.

**Alex:** [*Back to the weight bench.*] I stayed up all night. Alone. Sundeep didn't appear, not to tuck me in or for me to tuck him in. My father didn't phone. They didn't need anything. Not from me. [Beat.] My injury was temporary. Hers wouldn't be. A stroke. She lost all feeling in her right side and all speech. She was now confined to a wheelchair and my father ventured further into his orchard. I hated peach juice. I couldn't tell her jokes. I fed her, spooning slop into the good side of her mouth. I washed her hair, and I painted her nails, pink, and the rest of the time I read to her from *Heart of Darkness*. It takes a long time to read a novel, even a short novel, out loud. A week. Then we started over again. And again. *I watched the coast. Watching a coast as it slips by the ship is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you—smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering. Come and find out.*

**Jason:** *'I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there,' he said. 'And when they come back, too?' I asked. 'Oh, I never see them,' he remarked; 'and, moreover, the changes take place inside, you know.'*

**Alex:** She seemed to like it, and I still felt there was a lesson buried beneath the words that I'd missed, even though I was starting to know the book by heart. The same way that I've missed out on asking my mother about her past, her life with my father when the orchard belonged to the two of them, about her own dreams as a little girl, but I can remember our conversation about diving word for word. What do I know of my own mother except for her thin hair and her short, stubby toes?

**Jason:** And me?

**Alex:** Did *you* forget about Jason? Well, I did.

**Jason:** You need to be alone right now.

**Alex:** I'm already alone.

**Jason:** Then, maybe, we might try again.

**Alex:** Try what? I guess the thrill of fucking an Olympian has worn off?

**Jason:** Future Olympian.

**Alex:** Fuck you.

**Jason:** I was hoping you'd laugh. I used to make you laugh.

**Alex:** Don't try again.

## SCENE NINE

**Alex:** [*Checking her pulse and making notes.*] In two months I threw myself back into intense training, but I had to be careful.

**Coach:** Your left wrist will always be a bit vulnerable. Know this. Work around it. You're still the most talented rower we've got. Maybe in all of Canada. You have that potential.

**Alex:** [*To Audience:*] Potential. I compete because what else is there to do? How else do you know how far you've come? You need to be better than the others, discover a place none have been able to reach before. I suppose my mother is right, I've always been prideful. The most important thing is to be better than myself. Always better than my stupid self.

**Coach:** The rest is up to fate.

**Alex:** Fate is an asshole, Coach.

**Coach:** Fate is what brought you to the rowing club in the first place.

**Alex:** Fate is still an asshole.

## SCENE TEN

**Alex:** [*Back to the rowing machine.*] My mother and I watch all kinds of shows together: CSI, Law and Order, Judge Judy; and diving, hurdles, grand slalom skiing, extreme ice-racing... it's all the same to her. People at the height of their strength and power or people getting killed. And I tell her jokes. Like this one: A Newphie criminal, sentenced to prison, was allowed to take one item with him to occupy his time. His cellmates laugh as he produces a box of tampons. Why the hell did you bring that? they ask him. [Beat.]

It says here I can go horseback riding, swimming, running... Did you like that one, Mom? It's true what they say about the eyes... deep pools of the soul? Her soul had a stroke. Like my heart. I never thought of that word as anything but functional, work language, repetition, but if my mother has another one she'll...[Beat.] And when I look into the deep pools of her eyes I can tell you...she's as determined as I am to get somewhere...perhaps our souls float off somewhere...maybe my brother's soul evaporated. Maybe mine will roll over and drown. I wonder now, with every stroke I make, who is coming with me....? Who will be left behind....? [Beat.] Mom, what did Sundeep say? You're right, I want to know now. What did he say before he died?

**Sundeep:** I said a lot of things...

**Alex:** Can you point to the TV, give me a clue? I don't think he could have been thinking of me when he was dying. How could he? His body was breaking down piece by fucking piece.

**Sundeep:** Some things were bullshit....

**Alex:** His limbs shriveled, his skin become pocked, and wan. His feathery hair fell out, and his eyes went all hazy, bruises darkened. Since he floated away, he's never emerged out of the water.

**Sundeep:** But some things were real, and important too. The most important words I ever spoke.

**Alex:** But here he is. Inside my arms somehow. Inside my heart as I...

**Sundeep:** Where are you taking me?

**Alex:** Somewhere.

**Sundeep:** Not anywhere, I hope.

**Alex:** No, somewhere.

**Sundeep:** Why does a Canadian cross the road?

**Alex:** No time for jokes.

**Sundeep:** You used to love jokes.

**Alex:** Ok, why?

**Sundeep:** To get to the middle. [Beat.] I have coins for the ferryman.

**Alex:** Keep them.

**Sundeep:** I'd like to land.

**Alex:** Somewhere.

**Sundeep:** Land is good.

**Alex:** But there's more life underneath the water than on land.

**Sundeep:** There's more life in one heart than on all land. The last word I spoke was...

**Alex:** People assume it's the moving parts of your body as an athlete that experience the most pain. This isn't true. My legs hurt far more than my arms. The still parts bear the brunt of not-moving. Not moving is harder to heal.

**Sundeep:** Your name.

**Alex:** The reporters, when they do pay attention to us rowers, at the World's and in this Olympic prep time, make a lot out of the fact that my brother died.

**Sundeep:** They say you row for me.

**Alex:** That I am rowing out of love. Isn't this proof that love overcomes everything? [Beat.] I am not rowing out of love. I love him. But love is useless in overcoming pain. You can drown in love. How one overcomes pain is brute strength. And that takes training. Lots of training.

**Sundeep:** I say I am rowing for you.

**Alex:** And even then...

**Sundeep:** *The voice of the surf heard now and then was a positive pleasure, like the speech of a brother. It was something natural, that had its reason, that had a meaning...Ah! but it was something to have at least the choice of nightmares...Alex, Alex...*

**Alex:** *[Alex rows for at least 30 seconds, perhaps longer. Sundeep joins her on the machine behind her, and this makes her struggle more. The mother should also join in, and this makes her struggle more. Then she stops rowing, but the sound of water should continue. She smiles, as if recognizing an old friend, but then her expression goes blank as the lights on stage get very bright then quickly fade to black.]*

## Kedarnath Singh

*in conversation with Amandeep*

### **Marxism and Liberal Democracy Can Together Bring in a New System**

**Born in** 1934 at Chakiya, in district Ballia of Uttar Pradesh, Kedarnath Singh has traversed different literary trends and movements over the last six decades to earn a place of eminence not just among the contemporary Hindi poets but poets across languages. His poetry was first published in *Tisara Saptak* edited by Agyeya (1959). Among his important works are *Abhi Bilkul Abhi* (1960), *Zameen Pak Rahi Hai* (1980), *Yahan se Dekho* (1983), *Akal Mein Saras* (1989), *Uttar Kabir aur Anya Kavitayein* (1995), *Bagh* (1996), *Tolstoy aur Cycle* (2005), and *Srishti Par Pehra* (2014). He was awarded Sahitya Akademi Award for his collection of poems *Akal Mein Saras* in 1989 and the Jnanpith Award in 2013. His poetry has been translated into English, Spanish, Russian, Hungarian and many Indian languages. He has also published three books of criticism on modern Hindi literature – *Kalpna aur Chhayavad* (1959), *Mere Samay ke Shabda* (1993) and *Kabristan mein Panchayat* (2003).

*Q. What kind of relation did you share with the progressive movement? Could you throw light on the socio-political and cultural scenario in the Hindi heartland when you started writing?*

A. Progressive movement in Hindi had started much earlier but I never had a direct connection with it. I came later while the movement had started in 1936. Progressive Movement was a whole generation of writers, rich and intense... but I will confine myself here to the poets only. Perhaps Nagarjuna, a bilingual poet who wrote in Hindi and Maithili, was the best poet in that movement and, later, Kedarnath Aggarwal came. It was the period when Faiz Ahmad Faiz was writing in Pakistan. But even before Nagarjuna

and Kedarnath Aggarwal, there had been a tradition of progressive (*pragtivadi*) poetry. There were predecessors like Sumitranandan Pant and Nirala who cannot directly be described as progressive yet they helped to establish a basis for the movement. The magazine *Hans* had also become a centre of progressive activities. In its most representative form, there are three poets who stand out – Nagarjuna, Kedarnath Aggarwal and Muktibodh. I came much later. And I did learn from them and somewhat inherited from them too, but then I developed in my own way. I incorporated some elements of modern poetry and, using them I evolved my own style which perhaps communicates my poetry to the European mind. My style of writing does reach the non-Indian reader quite easily. Nagarjuna, more rooted in his language, fails to communicate with the European mind.

Secondly, when I started writing, the progressive movement was waning and I was just gathering my senses. Progressive poetry was still being written, but as a movement, its existence had become much weaker. It was no longer a dominant force. It continued to survive nominally. Yes, one thing more, Muktibodh was published in *Tar Saptak* where he wrote long poems with rich content. If progressive content is to be traced, it is possibly visible in his poetry. He has not been translated much. But the state of poetry after Muktibodh changed. I appear on the literary scene much after him. You can call me progressive, but it won't work if you do so in a direct manner. Progressive Movement did influence me but I did not embrace it as such. What I did was that while lending a new style and new idiom to the progressive content, I incorporated the folk into it and also, by bringing in the language and dialect of the countryside, I devised my own style.

*Q. In your poetry, there is an element of folk and nativism that seeks to discover the interiority of things, people and places in the rural landscape. Is nativism a fertile site for progressive affiliations?*

A. Progressive content has to do with the downtrodden, the marginalized and the oppressed sections of society. It is by relating to them and their lives that it comes into being. The progressive

content deals with two categories. One is the category of urban labourer who works in the factory. (Of course, the very nature of labour has changed in the present and the labourer is no longer the same.) The second is the category of rural peasants and labourers who are much exploited. I feel closer to them and to their sufferings. For me, the peasant and rural labourer who are working in the fields in the countryside are important. I have tried to capture the rhythm of folk in my style and idiom.

*Q. Is it important for poets to have political consciousness?*

A. When I use the word political consciousness, I mean politics as a fundamental element of cultural consciousness of a nation. I do not see culture as distinct from politics. Here I am using the term 'politics' not in the sense of formation of parties or change of regimes but in a wider sense. Even "pure poetry" might have a political dimension to it just as a political poetry can metaphorically represent the entire cultural ethos. I find it appropriate for a writer to be neutral to the politics of any party or organization. I have never been a member of any political organization but I perceive myself as a social democrat. I have been associated with Marxism but I have never accepted membership of any party. I have been a free thinker.

*Q. The progressive tone is audible in subdued notes in your poetry; if we consider the trajectory of your poetry from 1960s to the present, how could you maintain your equanimity of tone and that too consistently? Moreover, the contemporary events – Emergency, Dalit Panthers, Naxal Movement, and Babri Masjid– are almost absent from your poetry. Is it a conscious decision not to write on the political issues?*

A. I wrote several poems against Emergency. During that period I was residing not in Delhi, but in a small town, Padrauna (UP). I wrote very little about the period, yet its traces can be found in my poems. But yes, I have not written very candidly about that period. Still I have a deep sense of resistance against the ruling regime that we have today and its ideology and I hold it to be dangerous. India is multi-racial and multi-religious country but the

present regime is trying to convert it into a mono-religious country and I resist their move.

I have never written any direct political poetry. There is an underlying current, which you can see in my poetry, which operates subtly and I have tried to write poetry without being loud or overtly rhetorical. In this regard René Char is my model. He never wrote any direct political poetry but is considered to be a poet of resistance. (Laetitia Zecchini has written an article in French comparing my poetry with that of René Char, but it has not been translated into English as yet). I consider “essential” Marxism as the backbone of my thought process. I emphasize the word “essence” as I disagree with orthodox Marxism. Also, I believe that political poetry cannot be reduced only to writing about the political events. As far as tone is concerned, I believe there is a shift in idiom and approach in each of my collections but it is not overt. But there is a shift, always. If you compare my first collection with the later ones, there is a big change. I have seen this world for far too long and in its wider dimensions, yet changes in my poetry are slow, without claptrap and can be traced only at a very subtle, inner level. You won’t find much on the surface. Therefore, one can trace it on the level of the structure of sensibility itself. When I say structure of sensibility, I am referring to diction, idiom, style and rhythm. But there has always been a shift; otherwise I could not have sustained for that long. And I am still there.

*Q. How do you define resistance and protest? What relation does it have with poetry? And how does it figure in your poetry? You once said, “I had in me the dissident or rebellious sensibility but it took some time for me to articulate it”. So how have you articulated resistance and dissent?*

A. As far as resistance is concerned, you can say that I have been drifting more and more towards the local. Being local implies a resistance against the extreme forces of globalization. So I would define resistance as a struggle against globalization and market economy, and understanding how the policies of World Bank have impacted our economy, society and politics. Though World Bank is

not a form of colonialism, its imperialist tendencies have penetrated our culture. Going back to my roots, I have used dialect in my poetry to resist the onslaught of imperial forces on every aspect of our society. I have found my locale in my village and my people. But the locale I portray is not confined to a single region. My poetry uses dialect as a form of resistance: that is why I have devised a new style and idiom. (Phanishwar Nath 'Renu', who wrote *Maila Aanchal*, established an identity of fiction distinct from the European fiction as he has used the local dialect of his region in the fictional writings). In fact, when you come closer to your own dialect, you derive energies from it. I must say that tribal poets too are writing good poetry. The best poetry in India today is being written in the North East. They are the people who are otherwise considered very backward. But they are writing great poetry by using dialects, like Nagmi, Khasi and Manipuri, and their work voices considerable resistance. My latest collection of poems, titled *Srishti Par Pehra* also voices protest. In another collection, *Tolstoy aur Cycle* there is a poem "Farewell at the Crossroad", in rhyme, which represents my poetic vision. The poet, in this poem, wants to reach out to the masses because there is no other way to discover meaning. I believe if there is any poetic vision in my writing, it is best expressed in that poem:

*Now, my poems, leave  
Confront this world, its vagaries  
if it's only there  
the ektara of distinction-less plays  
break into those prison bars,  
mix among those lost faces  
strike friendship with the fishermen  
steal fire from the fireplaces*

(Trans. Jasdeep Singh)

There is also a cultural and political dimension to resistance. Language is part of this. Although I write in Hindi, I try to incorporate my native tongue Bhojpuri in my poetry. I believe that being rooted

in one's dialect and one's native tongue can also be a form of resistance. It is also a question of protecting one's language. In the market economy, the bigger fish eats the smaller one; in the same manner one major language tends to swallow its dialects.

*Q. What are your views on Marxism?*

A. As far as the political development of Indian society is concerned, we started with Nehruvian model. It continued to influence our minds for a long time. But Marxism has always rescued me, and the situation is not different even today. The essence of Marxism still influences me. As an ideology it has undergone many changes. Subtract 'class struggle' from canonical Marxism, but the larger question is: would Marxism survive without the idea of class struggle. There is a debate on the issue all across the world. But yes, there are different streams of Marxism.

*Q. Which stream of Marxism has influenced you more?*

A. I believe the later form of Marxism has influenced me more. But I disapprove of the Soviet model. It failed, and I believe it had very negative impact on creative life, on writing, painting and music in Russia. That era has passed. The Soviet model has failed because of its limitations. Marxism has split into various streams in the present times. Many American and European thinkers are working to shape it anew in which the idea of liberal democracy has gained prominence. After the disintegration of the Soviet model, a lot of other communist regimes in other parts of the world have also failed. What does it signify? There is a need to introduce reforms in Marxism. Earlier, Marxist revisionism was considered to be a derogatory term but it has become the need of the hour. Marxism and Liberal Democracy can together bring in a new system. But the basic spirit of Marxism still lies in the downtrodden. We can't afford to be non-Marxists in our country. So this is how I understand Marxism. But single party system is not acceptable to me.

Look at China now. It accepted one party system but there are many things which still remain incomprehensible. How does their system work? How do they conduct election? It is all hidden away. And they have accepted the market economy. They are

part of the global economy and are also competing with the Americans. There is no Marxism left in China now.

*Q. What is your understanding of ideology? Can ideology be a mark of identity?*

A. To me, idea is more important than ideology. I fail to imagine writing without an idea. As a matter of fact, the separation that we assume between *vichar* (idea) and *bhav* (emotion) doesn't exist. No *bhav* can exist independent of an idea. *Vichar* is inherent in *bhav*. I believe that an idea should be realized in a poem as much as ideology should. Wherever we see ideology floating on the surface, literature goes weak.

As for the question of ideology as a mark of identity, I would say this is a matter of debate. One comes across people even today who are orthodox in their understanding of Marxism. But there are also poets who want to understand Marxism from a different perspective. Their inclination is towards the evolution of a democratic form of Marxism. There are different interpretations of Marxism but I am not the best person to answer which one is more lasting, more relevant or more acceptable.

*Q. How far is it appropriate to describe literary movements as progressive?*

A. Every literary movement is progressive in its nature but the point is how one understands the term 'progressive'. One cannot restrict it to only one literary movement, one ideology, a particular form, or one organization. I believe the term could be defined in accordance with the changing human situation in different social structures. It is a folly to look at progressive movements through a single lens. It would reduce the meaning and scope of progressivism in general. Progressive movement has some link to Marxism but there are poets and writers who have not expressed their allegiance to Marxist ideology and yet are progressive. I was also influenced by Marxism but I never became a member of any party. If you understand the term 'progressive' in its wider sense, it would accommodate perhaps Namdeo Dhasal, Arun Kolatkar and myself

as well. But one cannot fix its meaning and scope within the restrictions of the erstwhile Progressive Movement.

*Q. How far has JNU been an appropriate site of work for you?*

A. It was indeed an appropriate site to explore my creative process, and its influence operates at many levels. First, I gained an all-India perspective of literature. The department that I joined was called Centre of Indian Languages; therefore it was not confined to just Hindi. I became acquainted with various other Indian languages and literatures. Second, I could understand that there is an over-lapping in various Indian languages. It is from JNU that I got the vision that no Indian language exists in isolation. There is overlapping in history. So it is impossible to get a comprehensive picture of Indian literature by excluding any language, because various literary trends have been perceived in diverse ways in different languages. For instance, it will be interesting to study how Tagore has been received in Hindi, Punjabi, or the Southern languages. Third, a long association with JNU helped me perceive the international dimension of literature. Soviet Marxism was very much alive back then, so I got to know more about Russian literature. I read the best of Russian literature. Boris Pasternak was one of them. Reading Tolstoy, I figured out that there was not much difference between poetry and prose and that one could locate poetic content in a condensed form in prose writing. It was during my stay at JNU that I learnt to appreciate the expansiveness of European poetry. Fourth, my ideological understanding was always inclined towards Marxism but my stay at JNU inspired me to question its certain nuances as an ideology. It was through my participation in various debates in JNU that I was able to figure out which Marxism was closer to my thought process. But I could figure out it in me very gradually. The communists from different parts of the world used to come there but I learnt a lot from the youth in JNU who used to discuss the broader aspects of different issues and some of the discussions were quite revealing. It was a very fertile period. The collision of

ideas and young minds was in itself an enriching experience and contributed to an understanding of the times we live in.

*Q. What kind of reading shaped your sensibility in different phases of your life?*

A. I have been influenced and inspired by many poets and thinkers and internalized many of the experiences reading them. My inclination has been more towards European, Irish and Latin American poetry than British poetry. Char, Brecht and Heaney are the poets of my choice. Apart from this, I find the resistance poetry of France quite significant. I have been influenced by the poems of W.B. Yeats written in the later phase of his poetic career because he was deeply rooted in his tradition. "Digging" by Seamus Heaney is a brilliant poem. T.S. Elliot was dear to me at one point but I can't read him now. I believe there is a colour of 'gentlemanliness' in English poetry. But Pablo Neruda and Niconor Parra from Latin America are important poets. Reading them, I have tried to evolve my own style.

*Q. What are you writing these days? Could you tell something about your forthcoming work?*

A. I have finished writing a book of poetry. It will be published along with another book of criticism in the next few months.

## Harjeet Singh Gill

### On Translating Flaubert

**The semiotic** analysis of *Saint Julien* led me to a very interesting problem of translation. During my M. Phil. Seminar on Semiotics at Jawaharlal Nehru University (1985-86) the students were given the Penguin edition of the English version. Since my analysis was based on the original French of Flaubert, the students pointed out a number of discrepancies. This led me to a full scale investigation of the problem and I realised that the English version represented an entirely different discourse. The biographical note on the translator states:

Robert Baldick was a Fellow of Pembroke College, Oxford, and of the Royal College of Literature and Joint editor of Penguin Classics (1964-72). He translated the works of a wide range of French authors, from Chateaubriand, Flaubert, Huysmans and Verne to Montherlant, Sartre, Salacrou and Simenon. He also wrote a history of duelling, a study of the Seige of Paris and biographies of Husymans, the Goncourts, Frederick Lemaitre and Murger.

In other words here is a case of an archetype translator who had all the qualifications mentioned in the traditional manuals of translation. He had maximum linguistic competence but obviously had not done a semiotic reading of the text that would have enabled him to apprehend the corresponding conceptual structure of the discourse. He invariably misjudged the immanent, introvert undercurrent of the discourse of *Saint Julien* and made “mistakes” where there was absolutely no problem of “language”, thereby transforming the highly pitched existential discourse of extreme psychic internalisation into an extrovert semiotic structure.

It is not even a case of “another reading” of the text, for as we shall see later, he is not conceptually consistent in his rendering. He worked very hard on “the linguistically difficult” portions of the text with excellent results but generally overlooked the significance of the existentially charged situations which were consistently presented by Flaubert in very simple French. The translator took

inexplicable liberties in all such cases and came out with a text conceptually opposed to the discourse of Flaubert. This disjunction can be illustrated by the following examples:

I. F. On vivait en paix depuis si longtemps que... (p. 86)

E. peace had prevailed for so long that... (p. 57)

On the face of it there does not seem to be much of a problem, yet it leads to a very serious distortion of the later movement of the discourse. Literally, we have: they lived in peace for such a long time that ... Now, 'peace had prevailed' is a direct reflection of the prevalent atmosphere while the discourse is about the parents of Julien who lived in peace, whose peace will soon be disturbed. Even within a general peaceful atmosphere one may not be at peace with oneself. We will understand the signification of this disjunction as we follow the narrative. The subject or the active agent of this proposition are the parents of Julien whose castle is being described in the earlier passage, peace is only the "objectivity" in which they live.

2 F. mais le bon seigneur s'en privait, estimant que c'est un usage des idolâtres ... (p. 87)

E. but the noble lord made no use of it as he held it to be heathen institution ... (p. 58)

Seemingly there is no problem also but it does point to the kind of casual attitude with which the English rendering is handled. Literally, we have: the seigneur (lord) abstained (from it) as he considered it to be the practice of the idolators. The introduction of "heathen institution" probably does not alter the over-all meanings, but if Flaubert had indeed intended this introduction, nothing in French language stopped him from doing so. Even if such an alteration does not make any difference here, this casual attitude and this tendency to take liberty with the text leads the translator into serious trouble later.

3. F. à force de prier Dieu, il lui vint un fils ... (p. 87)

E. in answer to her prayers a son was born to her ... (p. 58)

Literally, 'to her came a son'. Now the discourse of the opening chapter points to the piety of Julien's mother and to the marked resemblance of the child Julien to the baby Jesus, who of course, is going to attain sainthood at the end of the narrative. The "coming" of the divine child that Julien certainly is cannot be reduced to

“birth”. If Flaubert, following Catholic tradition, did indeed introduce ambiguity with the verb “come”, it was not by oversight.

4. F. un soir, elle se réveilla, et elle aperçut, sous un rayon de la lune qui entrait par la fenêtre comme une ombre mouvante... (p. 88)

E. one night she awoke and, in the moonlight which shone through her window she saw what appeared to be a shadow moving... (p. 58)

Julien’s mother is not really awake, her mental state is half-way between dream and sleep. She does not “see”, she only “perceives” (aperçut) a moving shadow under a ray of the moon. The disjunction between seeing and perceiving can hardly be overemphasized especially in the context of the psychic transformations that are taking place in the discourse. The notion of perception is further clarified when a little later, we have: *songe ou réalité cela devrait être une communication du ciel...* When the tension is between dream and reality, one does not see, one only perceives.

5. F. toujours heureux ... (p. 89)

E. always fortunate ... (p. 59)

I do not see any reason for rendering “heureux” as “fortunate” and not as “happy”. As we will see later, these minor casual slips will in due course result in serious misunderstandings.

6. F. il doutât même de avoir entendue ... (p. 89)

E. he was not even certain that he had heard it ... (p. 59)

F. que sa mère comptait bien le voir... (p. 91)

E. that his mother was certain that she would live to see ... (p. 61)

In the first example, “doutât” has been rendered as “was not even certain” when it refers to a mental state of “doubt”, and in the second, when “comptait bien” refers to a state of hope and expectation, the translator introduces the element of absolute certainty. In this discourse of St. Julien nothing is certain. The psychic tension revolves around doubts, hopes, expectations, fears....

7. F. et demeura stupéfait devant ce petit corps qui ne bougeait plus... (p. 92)

E. and was astonished to see the little body lie there without moving ... (p. 61)

Stupefied and astonished are entirely different states of mind. The little child is stupefied; and not at all astonished. He stands before this little body that moves no more; that moves no more because of “his action” that has stunned him, that has left him stupefied.

8. F. Le pigeon, les ailes casses, palpait, suspendu dans les branches d’un troène. La persistance de sa vie irrita l’enfant. Il se mit à l’étrangler; et les convulsions de l’oiseau faisaient battre son cœur, remplissaient d’une volupté sauvage et tumultueuse. Au dernier raidissement. Il se sentit défaillir... (p. 93)

E. the pigeon, its wings broken and its body quivering, was caught in the branches of a privet. Its stubborn refusal to die infuriated the child. He sat about wringing its neck, and its convulsion made his heart beat wildly, filling him with a savage, passionate delight. When it finally went stiff in his hands he felt he was going to faint... (p. 62)

This passage shows most clearly what indeed has gone wrong in this rendering. A highly internalised existential situation has been transformed into an extrovert state, inflicting a major psychic deviation on the kernel theme of the discourse of *St. Julien*. The “palpitating” (heart) is rendered as “quivering body”, and “suspension” is taken as “caught”. It is interesting to note that throughout the English translation, the “movement” is rendered as a static state. “The persistence of its life” is somehow understood as “its stubborn refusal to die” and “irrita l’enfant” becomes “infuriated the child”. The persistence of life is an internal affair, a state of hypertension from within as is the notion of irritation. Both of these concepts are interrelated and lead to a unified psychic interpolation. On the other hand, the stubborn refusal to die and the infuriated state point to a conscious act, an external behaviour, almost an outburst, a state of mind most unfamiliar to Julien. This English rendering demonstrates a complete misunderstanding of the discourse of *St. Julien*. “The convulsions of the bird made his heart beat” has become “its convulsions made his heart beat wildly”. Why this addition of “wildly”? And, the translation goes on with “filling him with a savage, passionate delight” where the French version refers to a “volupté sauvage et tumultueuse”. How on earth

can one equate “savage and tumultuous voluptuousness” with “savage and passionate delight”?

Passionate delight and tumultuous voluptuousness refer to two very different psychic centers of external and internal mental states. There is no question of a passionate delight; there is within the innermost layers of Julien’s mind a state of tumultuous upheaval which makes him feel “défallir”, disintegrate, decompose, faint. It is only from a storm within that one disintegrates, and not from a state of passionate delight.

9. F. mais Julien méprisa ces commodes artifices; il préférerait chasser loin du monde, avec son cheval et son faucon ... (p. 95)

E. but Julien despised these facile contrivances and preferred to go hunting on his own, with his horse and his falcon ... (p. 63)

To méprise is to mistrust and not to despise. There is no question of despising or hatred or dislike: it is an affair of “mistrust”. Julien does not trust this world of the prince where the royal hunt is conducted with all the paraphernalia of artifices; he prefers to hunt “loin du monde”, far from this world, and not “on his own”, which does not evoke the conceptual opposition of the princely world and the world far from it. The translator missed both these kernel semantemes of “mistrust” and “far from the world”, and presented a proposition contrary to the basic psychic theme of the discourse.

10. F. II devint comme elles. Quand sa mère l’embrassait, il acceptait froidement son étreinte paraissant rêver à des chasses profondes... (p. 97)

E. He grew to resemble them. When his mother kissed him he submitted coldly to her embrace and seemed to be pondering over weighty matters.

To devenir is to become and not to resemble. Becoming is an existential state set in the psychic transformation of the being: to resemble is only an external likeness. Living with the beasts, Julien becomes a beast, he does not simply resemble the beasts of the jungle, Julien the prince is no more a human being, his being acquires the state of the beasts. And, when his mother embraces him, he responds with a cold hug, dreaming of things profound, and not pondering over weighty matters. Julien the beast does no more

respond to the motherly affection, he is cold, lost in another world, dreaming of profound things which do not belong to the world of his mother. Profundity refers to depth, mystery; weighty matters are the matters of this world, this external world, the world which no more belongs to Julien, to Julien who does not trust it.

11. F. et ne pensait a rien, n' avait souvenir de quoi que ce fut. Il était en chasse dans un pays quelconque, depuis un temps indéterminé, par le fait seul de sa propre existence, tout s'accomplissant avec la facilité que l'on éprouve dans les rêves... (p. 99)

E. he had no thought or recollection of anything at all. Only the fact of his being alive told him that he had been hunting for an indefinite time in some indeterminate place, for everything happened with dreamlike ease ... (p. 66)

The transposition of the subject, as in the very first example for “they lived in peace” into “peace had prevailed there”, has changed the basic emphasis of the kernel semanteme. Instead of “he did not think of anything, did not have a souvenir of whatever there was,” the translator has transposed the subject and unnecessarily shortened the sentence as “he had no thought or recollection of anything at all”. The French version is assertive and emphatic, the break in the phrase is deliberate and should have been respected. The second part is a major distortion. Flaubert writes “he was hunting in some country, since an indeterminate time, with the mere fact of his existence, he accomplished all with facility that one has in dreams”. The subject is ‘he’ throughout the proposition which has been transposed into a non-personal category. It is “he”, Julien, who had been hunting in some unknown country for an indeterminate time, and it is the fact of “his” existence that is responsible for the accomplishment of all with the facility that one has in dreams. In “everything happened with dreamlike ease” the subject is not Julien, which alters the basic existential parameter.

12. F. Des cerfs emplissaient un vallon ayant la forme d'un cirque; et tassés, les uns près des autres, ils se réchauffaient avec leurs haleines que l'on voyait fumer dans le brouillard ... (p. 99)

E. Before him lay a valley shaped like an amphitheatre and filled with stags. They were crowded close together, warming

each other with their breath, which he could see steaming in the mist ... (p. 66)

Again, the same problem of the transposition of the subject. There is no mention of ‘‘before him’’, and the subject is not the valley but the stags. ‘‘The stags filled the valley which had the shape of a circus (theatre), and huddled one over the other, they warmed each other with their breath that one could see steaming in the mist’’. It is a continuous sentence in French with proper phrase coordination of relation and emphasis. Secondly, it is not ‘‘he’’, Julien, who could see, but it is the impersonal ‘‘one’’, ‘‘one’’ that could see in the mist. Flaubert’s use of the subject of the sentence is an extremely important stylistic device that delineates certain contours of existential emphasis in Julien’s discourse.

13. F. L’espoir d’un pareil carnage pendant quelques minutes, le suffoqua de plaisir ... (p. 100)

E. For a few minutes the prospect of such carnage as this left him breathless with delight... (p. 66)

Why couldn’t the translator render the sentence as ‘‘the hope of such a carnage, for a few minutes, suffocated him with pleasure’’? ‘‘Left him breathless with delight’’ and ‘‘suffocated him with pleasure’’ are certainly not equivalent propositions. Julien was ‘‘suffocated’’ because the hope of such carnage was a mixed hope, a hope that suffocates, that leads to an abyss. The present and the future arc encompassed in this kernel semanteme, *suffocated*. This hope is suffocation, it is not a hope of an ascending psychic order.

14. F. Puis tout fut immobile ... (p. 100)

E. Then all was still... (p. 67)

There may not be much external difference between ‘‘still’’ and ‘‘immobile’’, but in this context of the discourse, immobility as opposed to movement acquires a very specific connotation which will be further opposed in the second hunt where no such immobility is achieved. In the second hunt, the hunt that was not to be, the undesirable external movement makes Julien immobile from within.

15. F. il contemplait d’un oeil béant l’énormité du massacre. ne comprenant pas comment il avait pu le faire ... (p. 100)

E. considering with wide-eyed wonderment the magnitude of the slaughter, unable to understand how he could have carried it out... (p. 67)

One can understand the change of words when the cognates have different connotations in the two languages in question but a deliberate effort at such a substitution does not make any sense. Julien is “contemplating” and not “considering”. He may be considered to be meditating or reflecting. Julien is struck by the “enormity” of the massacre which he does not understand how he could have done. The recurrent pattern in this translation is that every effort seems to have been made to externalise the interiority of the discourse. The discourse of Julien takes place at a contemplative, immanent level; the translator transforms it into a manifest superficiality.

16. F. Il plia les genoux ferma doucement ses paupières et mourut... (p. 102)

E. The stag’s knees gave way. its eyes gently closed and it died ... (p. 67)

Again the same problem of transposition of the subject of the proposition. It is not the stag’s knees which give way or its eyes which are gently closed, but it is he (the stag) who bent his knees, closed gently his eyes and died. An active construction transformed into a passive proposition loses its basic thrust.

17. F. Julien fut stupéfait, puis accablé d’une fatigue, soudaine ; et un dégoût, une tristesse immense l’envahit... (p. 102)

E. Julien was dumfounded and then suddenly overwhelmed with fatigue, disgust and a feeling of infinite sadness took hold of him... (p. 67 )

Julien was “stupefied” and not “dumbfounded” as the translator would have it and he was not suddenly overwhelmed with fatigue. (He is) then overwhelmed by a sudden fatigue and a disgust, an immense sadness attacked (enveloped, covered) him. Apart from the problem of not paying enough attention to the kernel semantemes like “stupéfait” and “immense”, the translator’s consistent mutilation of sentence structures, transpositions of subject-object relationships, so important for every existential confrontation

signalling a given “condition humaine” side-track the basic thematic undercurrent of the discourse.

18. F. La solitude qui l’ enveloppait lui sembla toute menaçante de périls indéfinis... (p. 102)

E. the solitude which surrounded him seemed pregnant with indefinable perils... (p. 68)

Two kernel semantemes have again been casually treated. The solitude ‘envelops’ him and does not simply “surround” him. The intense internal relation of the envelop is not equivalent to being surrounded. Solitude is an abstract element of the psychic structure. It envelops like a shell; it penetrates the being of Julien. And this solitude is not “pregnant” with indefinite perils but it is ‘threatening’ (menaçante), again an active proposition.

19. F. il criait pour connaître sa figure... (p. 105)

E. he would call out to him to show his face... (p.70)

F. où il le traitait durement... (p. 106)

E. where he was treated very harshly... (p. 71)

Here are two examples of the transposition of the subject. In the first sentence he shouted (called out) ‘to know’ or “to recognise” his face (for he was afraid of killing by mistake). The object is not called to show his face. The second sentence has the same problem. The French proposition is ‘where he treated him harshly’. It is an active voice. It has been transformed into a passive proposition by “where he was treated”. “He” refers to the Calif and ‘him’, to the Emperor.

20. F. il avoua son horrible pensée... (p.110)

E. he told her of his dreadful fear... (p. 73)

Even though it does not alter the current of the discourse, I do not see the purpose that is served by changing “horrible thought” into “dreadful fear”. Moreover, “avoua” is not *told*, it is *confessed*.

21. F. et il entrevit dans l’ombre comme des apparences d’animaux.... (p. 110)

E. in the half-light he saw what appeared to be animal forms... (p. 73)

Here we have a case of the transposition of semantemes from one sign (word) to another. There is no mention of “half-light”. The

word, l'ombre, refers distinctly to "the shadow" but the semiotic point which is significant here is "entrevoir, "to notice across". Julien noticed across the shadow. He did not really "see", he only "noticed or perceived", he had an illusion of, for what he notices has only the appearance of.

22. F. C'est pour t'obéir... (p. 110)

E. I am obeying your orders... (p. 73)

An unnecessary extension from "it is to obey you" and also another transposition of the subject from impersonal to personal.

23. F. cependant elle redoutait une aventure funeste... (p. III)

E. however, she feared some disaster... (p. 73)

Here is a case of a contraction from "a fatal adventure" to "some disaster". These two semantemes may be semantically similar but they are semiotically quite different from each other.

24. F. et il marchait dans la forêt d'un pas nerveux... (p. 113)

E. and was walking through the forest with a springy step... (p. 75)

F. et il hésitait à s'avancer... (p. 113)

E. and he would pause... (p. 75)

F. le bois s'épaissait, l'obscurité devint profonde... (p. 113)

E. the forest became thicker and the darkness deeper... (p. 75)

We have here a series of problems of the comprehension of the discourse. Julien is not walking through the forest with a "springy step" but with a nervous step. The conceptual nature of this beginning of the second hunt that is not to be is opposed to that of the first hunt. Here Julien is nervous, he hesitates, il hésitait (it is not a pause), he is not sure of himself. This nervousness and this hesitation to advance in the forest is due to the "obscurity" that is becoming "profound". It is not due to "deeper darkness". Moreover, nervousness, hesitation and obscurity, all have a common kernel semiotic undercurrent. Darkness as opposed to light, has a connotation of clear, definite state, but the atmosphere which envelops Julien is obscure, where he is nervous, where he hesitates. These semantemes refer to Julien's state of mind and hence acquire an unusual significance for the comprehension of this discourse of the existential threshold.

25. F. il aperçut un loup... (p. 114)

E. he saw a wolf... (p. 76)

F. Julien parcourut de cette manière une plaine interminable...  
(p. 114)

E. In this way Julien crossed an endless plain... (p.76)

F. des croix vermoulues se penchaient d'un air lamentable...  
(p. 114)

E. word-eaten crosses leaned over in a pitiful way... (p.76)

F. un pouvoir supérieur détruisait sa force... (p. 115)

E. some higher power was rendering his strength ineffective...  
(p. 76)

Here are a few cases of misplaced existential emphases. Julien is enveloped in obscurity where he hesitates to advance. He ‘perceives’ there the appearances of animals, he does not ‘see’ a wolf. In this obscure, uncertain atmosphere of anxiety, he crosses a plain that is not just ‘endless’ but ‘interminable’. This wild goose chase cannot be terminated, and this helplessness exasperates him. The crosses here leaned over in a ‘lamentable’ attitude which is not just pitiful. It is interesting to note here that in these examples, the translator has employed ‘clear’ semantemes in place of ‘obscure’ signals whereas in the last example, the semiotic direction is reversed. The translator has taken all the pains to come out with an indirect correspondence with ‘some higher power was rendering his strength ineffective’. *Rendering his strength ineffective*, and, *destroying his force*, may be semantically equivalent but they operate on two very different semiotic parameters. All these four examples show how a slight deviation can alter the basic undercurrent of the existential thrust of the discourse.

26. F. les bêtes manquant, il aurait voulu massacrer des hommes... (p. 117)

E. since animals were lacking he would gladly have slaughtered men... (p. 117)

F. il allait la surprendre... (p. 117)

E. he decided to take her by surprise... (p. 78)

F. et il avançait vers le li, perdu dans les ténèbres au fond de la chambre... (p. 118)

E. and he went on towards the bed, which was hidden in darkness at the far end of the room... (p. 78)

F. il se recula, croyant devenir fou... (p. 118)

E. he started back, thinking he was going mad... (p. 78)

Here is another set of our four examples with serious semiotic deviations. Since Julien missed the ‘beasts’ (and not animals), he wanted to massacre men. This desire to kill in this macabre atmosphere results from an inner compulsion of dark psychic forces, this is certainly not a proposition where the semanteme “gladly” could be used. Similarly, in the next sentence he was “going to” surprise her, he does not “decide” to surprise. Julien is in no psychic mood to take decisions. He is not the master of the situation. The atmosphere of obscurity and uncertainty continues and Julien advances towards the bed “lost” in “obscurity”. “Lost” and ‘obscurity’ are kernel semantemes which form the basic semiotic parameter of this psychic threshold where Julien ‘retraces’ his steps, “believing” he was “becoming” mad. Julien was not just going mad; he was becoming mad. His entire being was shaken, hence a more powerful existential semanteme was necessary to describe the psychic state of Julien. Also, he is not ‘thinking’ in this atmosphere of extreme confusion, he is “believing”. It is an existential state of believing and becoming and not of ‘gladly’ wanting to do something or taking “decisions”.

27. F. elle avait obéi à la volonté de Dieu... (p. 120)

E. she had done God’s will... (p. 80)

F. il s’en alia, mendiant sa vie par le monde... (p. 121)

E. he went his way, begging for his daily bread all over the world... (p. 80)

F. repousse de partout. il évita les hommes... (p. 121)

E. rebuffed on all sides, he shunned mankind... (p. 81)

F. le besoin de se mêler à l’existence des autres... (p. 122)

E. the craving to take part in the life of other men... (p. 81)

F. il contemplait avec des élancements d’amour... (p. 122)

E. he felt pangs of love as he gazed at... (p. 81)

F. il rechercha les solitudes... (p. 122)

E. he sought out lonely places... (p. 81)

These six examples belong to the same textual context. They describe the mental state of Julien who has just committed parricide and is now struggling with himself to find internal peace and tranquillity. This is a state of mind where the notions of obedience, existence and solitude acquire a semiotic significance beyond their normal semantic correspondences. Hence, all the deviations from the kernel semantemes disturb the existential ensembles which hold the discourse together at an immanent level. It is in this context, the context of extreme internal upheaval, that “obéi à la volonté de Dieu” cannot be considered to be equivalent to “’had done God’s will”. “Had done” and “obeyed” are two different mental correspondences. In the next example, in “mendiant sa vie”, mendiant and vie are two kernel semantemes. It is an affair of “begging” and “life”. It cannot be transposed into “begging for the daily bread”. That is what this proposition amounts to in a normal situation. But here Julien is engaging his life in the act of begging. It is not simply a matter of getting something to eat; it refers to the total involvement or engagement of his life. It is in this mental state that Julien “’évita les hommes”, avoided men and not “’shunned mankind”. *Shunned* is an assertive act; avoidance is an act of submissive absence. When this psychic state weighs on Julien, there is “’le besoin de se mêler à l’ existence des autres”, *the need to mix himself with the existence of others*. The kernel semantemes here are “besoin”, “need” and “existence”. They cannot be rendered into English as “’craving” or “to take part in the life of other men”. Life and existence are not corresponding semantemes. It is in the same psychic state that we have “’il contemplait avec des elancements d’amour”. He contemplated with the pangs of love. Julien is not just “’feeling” the pangs of love, he is “contemplating”, reflecting. Similarly, in the last example, “’lonely places” is a very low key substitute for the existentially highly charged, “solitude”.

This note is not an exhaustive comparative analysis of Flaubert’s text with that of Robert Baldick’s English version. I have presented only a few examples to show the importance of the understanding of the semiotics of discourse for such an enterprise.

In his enthusiasm to transform the French text into an idiomatic English version, the translator did not pay enough attention to the immanent undercurrent of the discourse that controlled the articulation of the text. It seems he concentrated only on the specific sections or even sentences he was translating. In this process, he missed the importance of the kernel semantemes which were existentially highly charged semiotic signals responsible for the coordination of the discursive ensembles of the discourse. As a result, we have a series of wrong semantic emphases and transformations of internal psychic interpolations into external, overt behaviour patterns. The translator obviously did not follow what may be called the ‘psychic path of Julien’, the movement from his initial being to the eventual becoming. This is why he invariably missed the most crucial situations of psychic tensions which were the existential thresholds leading Julien from one state of mind to another. The very casual handling of the subject-object relation whose importance can hardly be over-emphasized in any encounter of the being with the other also points to the same tendency. We have seen that the translator very frequently indulges in this transposition of the active subject-oriented propositions into passive object-oriented sentences without realising that it is not just a matter of rendering a semantic equivalent. This relationship is a semiotic device used by Flaubert to delineate a given existential situation. The third deviation results from the usual extensions or contractions of the French phrases where there was absolutely no need even for presenting a readable text in English. The stylistic devices employed in the original text should be faithfully maintained as far as possible. After all, even when one reads the English version of this narrative, one is interested in ‘reading Flaubert’ and not Baldick.

### References

- French Text: *Trois Contes*. Garnier-Flammarion, Paris, 1965.  
English Text: *Three Tales*. Penguin Classics, London, 1967.

**Sakoon N. Singh**

**Notes on the Shrinking Space of Literariness in a Literature Classroom**

*Out of the quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry.* – W.B. Yeats

**Owing to** the sweeping reliance on theory in our reading of texts, a quiet development has been brewing in Departments of English Literature. While this politicization of the English Department was the need of the hour and reflected the true *Zeitgeist* when it commenced and was therefore justified in the challenge it held out to the insularity and hegemonic construction of the canon of literary studies, an equally valid apprehension is now dawning: have we been discarding more than we bargained for in this quest for providing an equitable representational space to the contenders? The intention to make the literary space judicious is justifiable and has a valid basis, but have we, in the process and in great measure, let go of the moorings of the discipline of literature in our newfound enthusiasm for this questioning? And this is a valid question to ask today because it is a question the need for which is looming large not just for the Departments of English Literature but for the broader issue of the space literature occupies in cultures.

Even though a platitude, it has to be stated at the outset that every discipline is founded on the bedrock of distinct methodology and tools of questioning. Literary critique is likewise built upon millennia-old line of interpretation. Plato onwards, an attempt has been made to distinguish poetry as a distinct space when compared to other spheres of knowledge. Poets and litterateurs in their own way have felt the need to address the question of having a distinct discipline in literature—in that the unique function of poetry in society, the distinct mode of the use of poetic language and also its subversive and aesthetic potential have been attempted to be understood. If one were to consider the western tradition, a

conventional literature classroom has been made to approach literary texts within the parameters and around the touchstones developed and refined in the process. These classical parameters have, in time, been reworked, remoulded and recast as the shorelines of literary boundaries have redrawn themselves each time a work exhibiting tendencies that challenge the “norm” has appeared. Literary criticism has undergone “corrections” of this nature and self-adjusted much in the vein of Eliot’s argument that for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order (of literary tradition) must be, if ever so slightly, altered. To cite conventional examples, when Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* appeared, it rewrote the classical rules of tragedy. Shakespeare, much before Miller, had riotously thrown to the wind many classical assumptions governing drama. In this dialectical exchange between criticism and literary texts, there has been an organic correspondence between the text and criticism.

A development that has now been unfolding is an overriding use of theory which, for the most part, is sociological/political/economic in its orientation to the extent that the literary touchstones are on the verge of being totally discarded. There was a time when it was presupposed that the criteria of literary excellence were met before texts were examined according to the several eclectic schools under the rubric of “theory”. The literary community was in the know of these “touchstones”, ambiguous as they were. In fact, no matter how marginal it seems today, the very evolution of a literary critic had to do with developing this “taste” for literariness.

However, with time the emphasis has turned so much upon the extra-textual parameters that we have begun to completely elide the issue of literariness of a text per se, and are in danger of throwing the baby with the bathwater. The Literature Departments are cavalier about abandoning literary tools for analysis, promoting reductionist readings and are *en masse* using pre-formulated theory templates to fit on texts. While it is worthwhile to break the insularity of the practice of close reading of texts, it is also important to somewhere foreground the literary interpretation of material. There is no reason to suppose that liberal humanism (which has

incrementally become pejorative in connotation) owned the corpus of methodology and tools of literary criticism as well. We can make space for new texts, read them in radical ways and yet subject them to literary criticism with a deeper literary awareness and not a mishmash of our shallow knowledge of social sciences. After all, tools by themselves are not biased. This cessation of reliance on literary criticism is also gradually translating into a virtual drought as far as further developments in the field are concerned. It has begun already to resemble a discarded monument fast dilapidating into a state of ruins, much like a language which retains vitality only when spoken and used.

The issue at hand is actually much more than an argument for restoration of literary criticism: it is about the shrinking space of literariness per se in the literature classroom. Paul de Man had of course voiced the sentiment in “The Resistance to Theory” (1982) and criticised theory-driven English Departments that had become “large organizations in the service of everything except their own subject matter” (“The Return to Philology”) the attempts of which to understand literature “to mean something” would forever be elusive, given the rhetorical and topological aspects of literary language. While it did foreground the subtle play of language and meaning in a literary text, it was an out and out deconstructionist position. However, it can also be argued that in eliding the literary meaning we are slowly morphing into a non-specialised branch of social sciences, which is a pity because nowadays one is likely to receive a large proportion of authentic literary response to literature from “non-academic” quarters. Amitav Ghosh is said to have admitted that he desists from engaging with research on his works emanating from the English Departments and instead reads reviews of his works that are only published in Bengali. Perhaps in so doing he is seeking out a response to his work that is more organic and spontaneous and not tutored in the way English literature Departments have come to be. And surprise of surprises that it should come from an author like Ghosh, who embodies the connect between academia and creative writing all too well. Looked at from another position, he is in a space where

he has seen the hazards of this counterproductive “theory overload” from very close quarters.

This brings us to another fundamental question of the role of literature in a culture. Literature has always enjoyed a special place in cultures (which has been distinct from other disciplines) that we are in the danger of ceding. As pointed out earlier, perhaps it has something to do with the use of language for self-reflection, an activity distinct from mere referencing. The clubbing of Cultural Studies with Literature is in itself an eventful development and in a way rewrites the definition of a “text”. However, this is all the more reason for us in the fraternity to raise our consciousness in this regard. The definition of text had widened under the ambit of Cultural Studies and it today affords the opportunity to literature students to engage with texts that are not strictly “literary”. Fair enough — under this rubric one can have a jingle, an election memorandum, an election speech or a chocolate wrapping as text, which is wonderful, but can these be substituted for a literary text? To have these in the classroom in order to perform a critical study is fine but the space of a literary text in a literature classroom cannot be ceded to these —because the act of construction of a canon has been based on a process of selection that has undergone eons of refinement dictated by the benchmarks developed in the process. One has to be aware of the risk of repeating the errors that historically have been made with regard to hegemonic construction of canon. Since many of these benchmarks are subjective and cannot be quantified, it should not become a reason for discounting them. Cultures have a way of ingesting this information and then using it for not only the writing of literary texts but also their selection and endorsement. The array of decision makers in this process involves authors, publishers, public critics and readers. These “subjective” criteria of defining literature will have been ingested by all these involved. Italo Calvino outlines the important need for classics in a culture. While he supposes classics as the “chosen books” in a culture, this can very well apply to literature as such. Not to be mistaken for snobbery, these are highly developed codes of taste and judgement that a culture has evolved

which, and much like other cultural constructs, ought to be valued precisely for the reason that they are unique to a given time and space and ought not be homogenised. What one has to guard against is the possibility of hegemonic dictates while also attempting to make the canon more and more inclusive. The players in the act of canon-formation ought to be aware of both the ends.

Literature has performed the function of not only representation (on which there has been aggressive focussing) but also of giving delight, instruction and, very importantly, of developing an aesthetic. In this function, it is clubbed with music, painting and sculpture. This phenomenon of the aesthetic is not to be seen in the narrow sense of decorativeness or of a supercilious indulgence, but as one stemming out of the perception of a consciousness; it additionally subsumes paradigms of beauty that a culture ingests and imbibes.

Sartre in “What is Literature?” endorses the literature of commitment and suggests, on the issue of the aesthetic, its presence in the text as an immutable fact that should exist without drawing attention to itself. He thus makes a case for an underlying aesthetic which like Hamlet’s ghost looms in the text without being seen. For all his effort to understate its importance, the fact remains that all action stems from the presupposition that it exists. What is important however is Sartre’s acknowledgement of the same as *a priori* in its existence. These then translate into benchmarks of form and content for the literary and artistic productions in a culture. A related inference that one can make is that since the appreciation has completely moved away from the deeper structures of aesthetic in a work and involves more external standards deriving from sociological and political points of view, this could have a bearing on the aesthetic aspect of literary texts. Since aesthetic is a more subjective phenomenon, it becomes a good distinguishing characteristic to study the cultural orientation in texts. To emphasize on literary characteristics of a text and to consider if they achieve success according to the set aesthetic standards could also propel the conservation of these benchmarks upheld in a culture, thus making a case for the preservation of the unique stamp of culture from which the text emerges in these times when homogenisation

of our spaces and, by extension, of our texts is a threat one has to guard against. The only people who talk about these core values in a literary text today, albeit in an amateur manner, are popular critics whose response is not tutored and pruned; they talk about literature being a distinct space, even though it is oftentimes done in an excessively idealised fashion.

A related development that one has witnessed which could be seen in conjunction with the argument above is the near-death of who once was the “public critic”. The public critic, by offering his/her judgement on literary and creative texts, including music and cinema, occupied a distinct space in culture. She acted as arbiter of public taste and, more importantly, brought the insular dialogue of academia into a lively, pulsating, spontaneous space. However, this space too seems either unable to accommodate the increasingly jargonised interpretations or, if viewed from the other side, unable to be put to use by the literary critics because of their inability to scale down the interpretation to popular consumption. The comfort that has been extended to the critic in his/her own domain of the classroom/conference room where many assumptions, though contentious, are tacitly agreed upon, is to his discomfort and awkwardness sorely missing in the wider domain. Increasingly the feeling is that one gets tempted into literature with the bait of delight that one falls for in youthful idealism but much to one’s disillusionment quickly morphs into hours and hours of thinking on extraneous matters, pushing matters of delight and deep enjoyment into recesses of a forgotten cavity. That also, one would contend, makes the current critical enterprise hostile to a plebeian view of the function of literature. That is where the cause for a larger disconnect lies.

In these “radical” times my argument has the risk of sounding too conservative. However, the only entity it seeks to conserve is the core value of literariness. What I am proposing is certainly not to divorce literature from the enabling practices that make the vital connect between literature and societal concerns. We need it more than ever today. Let the two ride in tandem. Infact, good literature welds together the aesthetic and the political in a complementary way so that both lend to each other. It is to set sound and sense on

a joyful salsa, and like the nimble-footed dancers, who bring delight to those watching, know all the while that it is the trust of each in the other that brings them to produce a virtuoso performance.

Or perhaps from my own classroom, I think Faiz's "Mujh Se Pehli Si Mohabbat" embodies this principle at many levels. The ghazal is considered a fine piece of workmanship at a stylistic level, a form that is anyway not easy to practice, given its rigid poetic structure. But in the hands of Faiz, it tantalisingly reveals the lofty idealisation that love inspires and in the same breath suggests how this, in the face of overwhelming inequities, remains wholly inadequate. This juxtaposition is not possible with either element missing. The tantalising secrets of youthful love are soon shown the mirror. The two subjectivities cohabit in the space of the ghazal and the challenge to amorous escapades is mounted by none other than the lover himself. With this he marvels at his own youthful folly which was blind to one aspect of existence. So like a badge he embraces the condition in all its imperfection. Or rather, accepting the two together would be more like it. While we lap up the conventional romantic moorings of the poet in their glory, the all-important refrain looms over the horizon, talking back not only to the lover but to all the ghazal practitioners of the past. The *mohabbat* that they have glorified has become inadequate. In fact, it has become immoral in unjust times. The poet voices his inability to become a part of this system where he begins to find the utter indulgence of sexual love as inadequate; indeed, there is an inference of it being almost immoral. He begins to expand his universe to include loves of other kinds: toward fellow human beings and the disadvantaged. So in a stroke he also expands the definition of ghazal, the brilliance of his argument tears open the seams of the very rigid poetic form with its accepted conventions, to accept 'loves of another kind, aesthetics of another kind' that will lend themselves to the struggles outside. And in so doing they will have opened their eyes to a truth and made it a part of their art. In this the art would approximate even a higher level of beauty because it would be closer to the truth. But one without the other would wither away. This becomes Faiz's manifesto.

For an author to develop a moral consciousness is imperative and without that s/he would be nothing more than a craftsman with words for material but then a layer of his/ her unique aesthetic sensibility will have to weld itself to that to make a whole. His aesthetics and commitment are in unison. For the longest time, it was alright to just presume it but an acknowledgement of Faiz's sure aesthetics is in order today.

In the Departments what we have to consciously desist from is a kind of pre-decided, premeditated fabrication of templates that attempts to "reign in" literature. There is a tendency to "size up" critical positions according to the orientations they reflect, a practice that is counterproductive to the nuanced play of literature. If we are worried about literature becoming propaganda (which is a valid fear), we also have to worry about our literary criticism becoming propaganda. To extend the analogy of blind men attempting to know the elephant, in the case of literary theory not only are we groping "parts" and not the "whole" in our attempts to understand, the situation resembles having a cast of iron (which resembles the real object in a very crude way) fixed on the elephant and denying it its aliveness, its quivering breath, its vitality and spontaneity. What we have in front of us as our object of analysis is not being allowed a life in the first place.

Literary criticism has an important role to play in the production of literature because the critics are arbiters of taste in society and ought to go back to the moorings before we become second-rate cousins of social sciences with nothing to distinguish us.. These practices and the aforementioned divorce between our critical apparatus and literary texts is beginning to have an impact on our literary production. So it is a curious situation today: while the Literature Departments are stuck in theory, those outside are for the most part writing in a disengaged manner for consumers rather than readers. They are developing formulae, much in the vein of Bollywood, producing a vague category of market-driven, hugely popular writing which is essentially formulaic and banal and cannot, by any stretch of imagination, be considered literature. On the other hand, highly erudite authors are, by their active collaboration with

academia, making the borders between literature and criticism porous. The judiciousness that we are so worried about comes about in good writing only through the means of a raised consciousness without which a writer would not have the claim to be considered meritorious. This is in a way producing authors who are well-grounded in their commitment but in the bargain what has become a casualty is the erstwhile writing that would come brimming out of the pulsating, throbbing fabric of a culture. Now, by and large, the risk for the most part is for it to either become banal or stilted, academic and awkward. By completely obliterating our tools of literary critique we are forsaking the parameters of literary appreciation which has a subtle trickling effect on the consciousness of a culture and provides it the touchstones to create art. The literary critic as an arbiter of taste has to persist even though we have to rebel against the seat of the critic becoming too cushy and too privileged. Similarly, one is not arguing for a decadent “art for art’s sake” situation but, at the same time, by completely relying on non-literary methods of appreciating literature, we could be moving towards forsaking the classification of the “literary” altogether, which is not in the least falsely alarmist – because a perusal of the current research in the Literature Departments will point in the direction.

I would wrap up with the assertion that this essay is not anti-theory but pro-literature.

## Rosy Singh

### The Human Condition in Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Shadow'

**While the** Grimm brothers collected German folktales and published them as *Children's and Household Tales* (1815), there were several Romantic writers like Andersen in neighbouring Denmark, Hauff, Novalis, Tieck, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Chamisso and even the old Goethe in Germany who felt inspired to write their own fairy or wonder tales. The interest in the genre of fairy tales marked a return to the innocent and the naïve after the period of classicism. The political intent was to preserve the folktales and folksongs for posterity and to inculcate through them pride in national heritage especially as Germans still lacked a consolidated state like France and England.

The idea was also to make children's education more meaningful and innovative. The idea of the literature meant specifically for children can be traced back to the Enlightenment. However, children's literature produced in this period was too moralistic and dull. The rationalist pedagogy had little to do with the world a child usually inhabits. The Romantics rejected this synthetic and pedantic pedagogy, with a clear preference for seamless fantasy accompanied with colourful illustrations. Today, of course, it is commonly accepted that children enjoy fantastic literature far more than they enjoy any text burdened with good thoughts. Walter Benjamin, known primarily as a philosopher and cultural theorist, was curiously a collector of children's books. Between 1929 and 1933 he made a series of radio broadcasts for children in Germany. In a fragment essay "A Child's View of Colour" Benjamin refers to children's inclination towards bright colours. They like the way colours shimmer in soap bubbles and magic lanterns (Benjamin 1966: 50-51). In another essay "Old Forgotten Children's Books" he argues that

"...children want adults to give them clear, comprehensible but not childlike books. Least of all do they want what adults think

of as childlike. Children are perfectly able to appreciate serious matters, even when these may seem remote and indigestible, so long as they are sincere and come straight from the heart.” (Benjamin 1996: 407)

Children have a natural urge to explore, away from the judgemental gaze of the adults. Attracted to a magical world where they are free to make their own choices, this is the first step in the struggle for independence from the Other, in this case the grown-ups. There will always be some grown-ups who cannot read fairy tales. Romantics called them philistines who cannot appreciate fantasy because they are either too rational, or too educated, or simply too arrogant. But the genre of fairy tales continues to flourish despite these grown-ups.

The fairy tales of Andersen (1805-1875) with 112 illustrations were first published in 1848. Prophets seldom get recognition in their native country and this seems very much true of Andersen, for his contemporaries in Denmark did not take him seriously for a long time or, at the most, treated him condescendingly as a writer fit only for the nursery. It was in the neighbouring Germany that Andersen was first taken seriously. He was the first writer in the nineteenth century to create literary fairy tales which combined sheer fantasy with existential questions, in a unique style and language which attracted and continue to attract both children and adults. None of the other Romantics really succeeded in creating fairy tales which have as their readers children as well as adults. This is where Andersen created a niche for himself in the history of literature, for his mode of presentation and the appeal of language to children all over the world; at the same time adults can read a deep meaning into them at the level of human existence. His fairy tales combine childlike simplicity and innocence with the subtle complexities of human existence. Another text which moves both children and adults is *The Little Prince* (1945) written and illustrated by Saint-Exupère, where the author remarks in its dedication that “all grown-ups were once children “ although few of them remember it”. More recently, J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* is being read all over the world by children as well as adults.

To return to Andersen, his characters often go through a series of ordeals and cruel rejections before perishing or gaining happiness. The ugly duckling has to overcome many hurdles and live through many unhappy moments before discovering its true identity, that it is not ugly and clumsy but a beautiful swan, more beautiful than the ducks in the duckyard who bullied and ridiculed it. Of course, the self-discovery is possible only because the ugly duckling displays a yearning for the world outside its little duckyard. "Emperor's New Clothes" reflects, with wit and irony, on the hypocrisy of the world of adults where none of the adults is ready to call the emperor naked. It is a child who finally dares to speak the truth. "But he is not wearing anything!" This remark reverberates in the crowd watching the emperor's parade. Today this famous line from the children's classic is used in so many situations. All said and done the world has not really changed much in terms of human behaviour. Even today, might is right and no one risks calling the emperors of the world naked. Not all of Andersen's tales have a happy ending. *The Little Mermaid* is the tale of a restless mind full of desires. The mermaid lives with her grandmother and six elder sisters at the bottom of a vast beautiful ocean with all the comforts. What differentiates her from her sisters is that she is not content like them but desires to know the Other, the faraway world beyond the ocean. However a glimpse of the world of humans is permitted to mermaids only when they have attained the age of fifteen. Then she exchanges her fish tail for legs but has to pay the price for it, her tongue, i.e. her lovely voice. This desire to cross the threshold and be a part of the world of humans ultimately costs her her life as she dissolves, in the end, into foam in the ocean. This is what defines a human being, one who craves for the forbidden fruit, that what he does not have or is not allowed to have, and to go to any extent to fulfil one's dreams and desires which are like the horizon, beautiful but distant and sometimes unattainable. The fabulous creatures like the mermaid become representations of the human predicaments which are universal in character. A statue of the little mermaid, perched on a rock at a beach in Copenhagen is the biggest tourist attractions in Denmark and it has acquired the status of Denmark's national symbol.

“The Shadow” (Danish *Skyggen*, 1847) is inspired by Adelbert von Chamisso’s German novella *Peter Schlemihl’s Miraculous Story* (1814) in which the protagonist sells his shadow to the devil for material gains. However Andersen’s tale transcends its source of inspiration. “The Shadow” is Andersen’s less known fairy tales compared to the popular tales and now classics like “The Little Mermaid”, “Emperor’s New Clothes” or “The Ugly Duckling” but it can easily be counted as his most complex and sophisticated tale. On the basis of this tale alone, Andersen, dismissed by his contemporaries in Denmark as a writer fit only for the nursery, can be compared to the likes of Kafka and Dostoevsky who also provide deep insights into the complex psychic tribulations of the Being. Let me first present the narrative before proceeding to the next stage of the motifs.

## I

This is the tale of a young learned man and his shadow. A learned man found the north too cold and so he moved down to the south just like migratory birds. But there he found the sun too bright and so he was forced to stay indoors during the day. Under the sun the shadow would become small. He picked up the habit of the town residents of taking a siesta in the afternoons and venturing out in the evenings only. At this time of the day the shadow was always long. Across the street was a quiet house with a balcony from where came the soft sound of music. The flowering plants in the balcony were watered and tended regularly; so obviously someone was living there but the learned man never saw anyone. His curiosity was aroused.

One night he woke up all of a sudden and looked outside. He saw in the opposite balcony the silhouette of a beautiful woman. The light from her was so dazzling that it hurt the learned man’s eyes. Some days later the learned man was again in his balcony. A single candle was alight behind him, which caused his long shadow to be cast completely over the balcony across the street. The learned man’s shadow stood amidst the flowers.

Half in jest and half seriously the learned man commanded his shadow: ‘Shadow, just take a look inside that house opposite!’

He nodded to his shadow, which nodded back politely. It would have been difficult for a shadow not to do so. After some time the man returned to his room, however, minus his shadow. He did not think much of the incident for all he wanted was a good sleep and one does not need a shadow for it. But the shadow did not return even the next day. The learned man did not like his shadow's disappearance. He felt a little lonely. Not that his shadow had been useful to him but, even so, it still gave him an empty feeling now that it was gone. Moreover, he was scared that people might say something about it.

Everything grows much faster in warm countries. To his great relief, the young man noticed that he was beginning to grow a new shadow after only a few days. Three weeks later, it was so large that the learned man dared to mingle amongst people again. No one noticed anything odd about him anymore. But he has had enough of the strange south. He sold the house and returned to the north.

#### **After two months**

The learned man had a visitor: a tall, thin man, dressed like a gentleman. It was his look-alike, the shadow he thought was lost. It seems to be doing well in life without him. It was flaunting a gold watch chain and rings with diamonds and stones. Dressed in black with a beard, it extracted a promise from the learned man that he would not tell anyone that it was a shadow. In return it would not tell anyone the learned man's fraudulent deeds like cheating in the exams or copying pages from other books when writing his first book. The shadow seemed to be rather vain, like most humans. It stamped with its foot on the new shadow that lay like a poodle-dog near the legs of the learned man. The new shadow remained perfectly still and quiet so as to be able to listen how a shadow could get loose like this and become its own master.

It narrated what it saw that fateful night in the opposite house. It identified the beautiful but elusive woman who was shining like a star as 'poesie'. The learned man exclaimed that poetry was, indeed, an outcast in big cities. The shadow lived in the house three weeks. Of course it did not get too close to her, for she would have

destroyed the shadow. As a consequence of the encounter with poetry, it started putting on weight and it realised that it was someone and not merely someone else's follower. It was ashamed for it had no clothes and no shoes. So it moved only in the dark and listened to people's conversations. It used that information to make money and become wealthy. The shadow handed over to the learned man his visiting card. Now it wanted to be addressed as 'Sir'.

### **After seven years**

The shadow visited him again and invited him to a journey.

*I am going on a journey this summer, why not accompany me? We shall get on well for we've known each other our whole lives. Come with me as my guest. You don't have to worry about money. I have, quite literally, more than enough of that. I'll pay for everything. Travel does a person good. In any case, you'll be my shadow, so you'll be doing something for me as well.* (Andersen1997: 328-29)

The learned man refused. Meanwhile he had become poor. He had sold very few of his books and he slept badly at night. The housekeeper said to him: 'Why do you work so hard? You look like a shadow of yourself.' (329) The learned man felt disconcerted. The shadow urged him to accompany him on a trip to the coast. This time the shadow prevailed upon him and the learned man accepted the proposal. According to the terms and conditions, the shadow was now the master and the learned man the shadow. The healthy sea breeze did them good. The shadow dropped the formal and respectful form of address 'Sir' and called its former master by his Christian name whereas the learned man still had to call him 'Sir'.

Then they met a real princess. Her problem was that she was too smart and could see through everything. This was making her unhappy. She noticed immediately that the tall, lean man did not have a shadow. The shadow gave a clever reply: 'I have brought up my shadow to clothe himself like a person' (332).

The princess fell in love with the shadow. She, however, decided to test his knowledge and so she went through numerous books on science and philosophy and collected difficult questions

like why does the earth travel around the sun, and why does a person have a personality to which the shadow was able to reply to her satisfaction. Finally she put him one final question: 'Why is a person a person?' The shadow did not know the answer but it said:

That question is so simple! he cried. Even my shadow knows the answer to that! (335)

The shadow, which was actually the learned man, replied: 'Because he thinks that he is a person!' The learned man had written a whole book on the subject. The princess was by now deeply impressed and she even called the shadow 'a learned man'. Convinced that she had made an excellent choice, she proposed to the shadow forgetting that she is a princess and he a commoner. The shadow agreed. Now the learned man decided to protest against what he called deceit. He rebelled against the idea of being condemned to a shadow-existence for the rest of his life. But it was too late. He was arrested and executed just before the wedding. The tale ends with a grand wedding.

## II

Vladimir Propp, the renowned theoretician of folktales, preferred to call them 'wonder tales' as all fairytales are not necessarily about fairies. He gave a historical and economic basis to the Russian wonder tales and classified them into various categories. According to Propp, the wonder tales appeared historically after the myths and they are de-sacralised myths. Despite his carefully formulated historical approach with a rich sprinkling of quotations from Lenin and Marx, he found himself in trouble in Stalin's Soviet Union. In contrast, Claude Lévi-Strauss provided an ahistorical approach to folktales, particularly myths. According to him, since time and space are arbitrary in such tales, they are not bound within a historical cultural context. Instead they express the ahistorical, archetypal behaviours of the psyche. Both Propp and Lévi-Strauss focussed on folklore as a science. Their method was inductive, proceeding from data collection to conclusions. I present in this essay a semiotic analysis of Andersen's tale with focus on existential themes.

In these tales there is a deliberate lack of correspondence with the real world and the laws of nature are deliberately violated. The narrative space is not inhabited by realistic human characters or realistic actions in a realistic situation. The narratives choose a world that is strikingly unusual, impossible, supernatural or fantastic. The fantastic creatures and the trappings in the plot fascinate and delight the children. But such tales represent only at the manifest level the world of the impossible. At the immanent level, the Impossible or the Surreal refers to a set of real-life possibilities which involve the adults. Children take fairy tales literally whereas adults try to read them symbolically or metaphorically. This is where the fairy tale becomes philosophical and psychological explorations of some aspect of the complex human existence. The fabulous creatures become extensions of the human consciousness and the human predicaments which are universal and existential in character. This literary technique, normally ascribed to children's literature, provided Andersen with the space to say things about adults which he would perhaps not have been able to say in genres meant exclusively for adults. Andersen broke new ground in the genre of fairy tales, lent them respectability and created for them a place in the broader category of literary texts.

In the genre of fairy tales, the action often begins with the protagonist leaving home, her/his familiar surroundings for a strange and an unknown world, unconsciously seeking adventure. Thresholds are crossed. The hero would go into a deep and dense forest or an unknown kingdom or from water to land or land to the underworld. *The Shadow* begins in a similar manner. The learned man leaves his home in the North and shifts to the unfamiliar South. His routine changes. He remains indoors during the day and ventures out only after sunset. In other words, his shadow does not have to undergo the indignation, the humiliation of shrinking in the afternoons. In the evenings, when the learned man goes out, the shadow is anyway in a long elongated form. The shadow is bound to its master. It is his inseparable companion but at the same time it is not considered of much consequence and is, more often than not, taken for granted. It cannot exist without its master and so it never has a life of its

own. For example it can move only when the master moves; it has to nod when the man nods which signifies that it has to do things as per the wishes of its owner or the master. In many cultures the dark shadow is considered inauspicious, like in the Indian context many people still avoid an untouchable or a widow as well as his/her shadow. Many proverbs highlight the same, e.g.: A shadow fell over his happiness; to make a shady deal. Some medieval torture chambers were designed in such a manner that there would be no shadows as this heightened the devilish ambience of the torture chambers. Sometimes the shadow is considered a nuisance as in the case of surgery. No wonder designer lights have been invented which do not cast shadows on the surgeon's table!

The learned man and his shadow can be understood as a metaphor of the tussle, the confrontation between the various selves within the same person. One self is at the manifest level, the image that a person presents to the outside world. The other self at the immanent level is within the person. This is the real self that knows all that the manifest self is up to. Each one of us has to face this inner self and explain or justify one's conduct to it. The inner self is the one to whom one confesses one's dreams, frustrations and sins. In a way it is frightening to face it than to face an outsider for one can cheat and pretend to all others except to one's inner self who is always aware of what is going on. It censures or condones one's behaviour; it can condemn you or acquit you. Andersen gives it the form of a shadow. It is inseparable from the manifest self. The actions of a person are determined by the assertion of one self over the other. The signification of the shadow, the projection or the *doppelganger* (a German term now also used in English. The *doppelganger* or the double looks the same but his character is often the opposite), becoming small and long is again to be interpreted in terms of the influence of one's inner self, how powerful or weak it is. The shadow may be repressed or suppressed but this does not really mean that it has to be subservient as is the case in Andersen's tale.

Various possibilities exist when the two selves, the manifest and the immanent, wrestle with each other. In this story, the

immanent, i.e. the shadow, is initially weak but it becomes, over the course of time, more powerful than the manifest, the learned man. It is not without reason that the person around whom the story revolves is called, with all pun intended, the learned man. He belongs to the group of educated people, who write exams and by virtue of qualifying these exams are called learned men. The shadow / doppelganger knows this learned man very well. He cheats in the exams in order to qualify and later on he writes books through plagiarism. Apart from all this he is a pedant. He also does not pay his taxes. He is a learned man but not a wise man. According to his shadow, he does not “behave correctly”. He is a teacher with modest means but it looks like deep down he is drawn towards wealth which he can never earn through tuitions. This desire is represented by the shadow. For some time, to be precise in the north, he has control over his alter ego, his inner Self or shadow, which impatiently desires wealth and does not object to deceit. In the south the situation reverses. The alter ego or the shadow starts developing, whose important signifier is the lack of shadow’s shrinking in the daytime as the learned man never goes out. It is only in its elongated form that it makes an appearance. As the desires multiply, the discontentment of the shadow goes on increasing and it becomes soon so powerful that it “breaks loose” the moment it sees a chance and it acquires independence. In other words the Self which craved for wealth by hook or crook was now free from any controls. The learned man himself set him free for he chose to go the south where the sun is hot, giving the shadow ample opportunity to rest and grow. Also he himself tells the shadow to go to the opposite house. Thus, at the unconscious level, he is supporting the shadow in the combat. The following remarks of the shadow substantiate this point:

I stood on my own two feet only after you asked it of me. (322)

I am an independent man. You made me so. (324)

So the shadow seizes the critical moment of freedom that comes its way and stands on its own two feet instead of lying docile at someone’s feet, trailing along and being tread over by others. The first thing it acquires is human shame. It becomes

aware of its naked appearance and so it lurks in dark corners, where it feels at home, till it finds clothes and shoes. Now it can pursue its desires without any reservations. It becomes rich fraudulently by blackmailing people. After all, the shadow still does not have a shadow to bridle its ambitions or show it the mirror:

I heard the bad things that people said about their friends and families. I used that information: I wrote to those families, neighbours, and friends about what I knew of them. Those people became fearful of me. Naturally, they didn't want all that I knew about them to be put in the newspaper! To get what I wanted, all I had to do was to say it and it happened. I also received a lot of money. More and more of it, because I knew where and how to get it. (327)

It boasts of doing well in life and flaunts its newly acquired wealth, particularly in front of its rival, the learned man. The gold watch chain, the splendid rings with stones and diamonds, etc. are too conspicuous to be ignored. It offers money to the learned man for his loss of shadow and offers to pay a compensation for his replacement. The man's other Self is impressed by the wealth but still it tries half-heartedly to be virtuous. It goes back to the "cold north" where it hopes that the things would be back to normal. The shadow, however, follows him which means that the desires continue to haunt him. The shadow asserts:

I deserve esteem and respect. (324)

I am not commonplace. (322)

As a shadow, I always felt so subservient! (331)

There is a brief reconciliation as equals when the shadow sits in the salon of the learned man, in his best chair and sips tea. At this point of the narrative both the selves, the conscious and the unconscious are sizing each other. But it is no ordinary combat, for both belong to the same person. Even in the salon, from the conversation it becomes clear that the shadow is strong. It admonishes the learned man for his frequent interruptions while it was speaking.

In the second trip, from the South to the Coast, the physically feeble and shrunken learned man seems to be losing the battle to

the handsome and lean shadow who begins to act as his master. One loses weight as the other puts on weight. The metamorphosis from shadow into the master takes seven years. The number seven is always significant in fairy tales. It is as if a cycle is completed, as the seven days in the week. The power relation gets completely reversed when the anonymous shadow becomes the master and acquires an identity of its own whose important signifier is the visiting card. Now it has an address. Fortunes have turned and it can also afford to pay for the learned man's holiday by the sea. The deep and the restless sea is a signifier for the unconscious. It demands that it be addressed as Sir. (In Danish, as in German, there are two forms of address for second person singular, the informal 'du' used for friends and family and the formal 'de' used in formal situations. This dichotomy is transcribed into English by the use of or dropping of the term 'sir'.) Later on, during the coastal vacation, the shadow slyly stops calling the learned man 'Sir' whereas it insists on being addressed as 'Sir'. The transformation in status becomes clear from this reversal. The superior person, the master says 'du' to the one who is inferior in status whereas the servants always say 'de' to their masters. Earlier, the learned man wanted to believe in and teach truth and honesty. Later on, the Other self who wanted to make a quick buck and lead a good life, takes over. It makes all the right moves. Towards the end the shadow "the King to be" is ready to pay a good salary every year to what it describes as "the royal shadow" in return for his silence and absolute obedience. The shadow's triumph is complete when the princess calls it "a learned man" and falls in love with it. The shadow has graduated from the ground and the walls to the chair and then to the princess's palace.

The learned man and the princess read books; the learned man even writes books but their bookish knowledge has not made them wise. This is the author, Andersen, taking a dig at the intellectuals. On the other hand, the shadow had a rare encounter with poetry (not books on shelves). From a distance, from the "Gate of Poetry", it learned more than someone who had spent his entire life reading all the poems he could find. The world's truth was not

in books on shelves. It was all around him and that experience made the shadow into an independent and a clever being. The three-week proximity of the sublime poetry transforms it into a thinking being, independent and confident. If it had tried to get too close to poetry, i.e. taken it too seriously, she would have destroyed him as has been the case with some thinkers like Hölderlin or Nietzsche. It is a paradox of human existence that people with complete knowledge get destroyed. It keeps a suitable distance from her so that it acquires the gift of knowledge as is symbolised by the semiotic gesture of gaining weight. The interaction with poetry can be of various types. In case of Andersen's shadow, it learns the ways of the world. This encounter of the dark shadow and the bright poetry teaches it how to manoeuvre its way in life although this, too, is full of deceit and pretensions. It becomes a charlatan. It outwits the honest but weak learned man, who is afraid of his own shadow and thus fails to exert his free will. He submits tamely to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his adversary, the shadow. He did not realise that the shadow needed him to lend it respectability because in human society, a being without a shadow is considered either a devil or an angel and neither of them is human.

In the end the learned man is put to death which implies that the shadow over-shadows completely the learned man. The Self, the unconscious, which craved for the luxuries of life dominated completely whereas the honest and upright learned Self, the mask of the educated, is overpowered and annihilated. The confrontation ends with the complete victory of the clever Self over the teacher with weak principles. The duel is over. Ultimately one of them has to make an exit and it is the shadow which devours the learned man or to put it in mild words, the learned man is driven out of the Being and the space is occupied completely by the shadow. There is no happy end to this unusual fairy tale. It ends with the victory of bad over good.

### III

This article would not be complete without a reference to C.G. Jung, who uses the shadow as a technical term in his 'complex

psychology'. Jung's concept of shadow appears to overlap with Andersen's shadow. Jung calls the other side of ourselves, the archetype of the self, which is to be found in the 'personal unconscious' – the Shadow. The shadow, according to Jung, is the one who wants to do all the things that we do not allow ourselves to do out of fear or shame. The shadow is all that we do not want to know about ourselves. It represents the desires and emotions that are incompatible with law and morality. It represents the guilt-laden personality whose ultimate ramifications reach back into the realm of our animal ancestors. We have an inkling of this foreign personality, when, after being possessed by an emotion or overcome with rage, we excuse ourselves by saying, 'I was not myself', or 'I really don't know what came over me'. What 'came over' was in fact the shadow, the primitive, uncontrolled, and animal part of ourselves. The psychological shadow is cast by the conscious mind just as the physical shadow is cast by the body. The conscious responds to education and social training but the unconscious does not respond to any social controls and remains as untamed as ever when the first man walked on the face of this earth. There is no point in denying or repressing one's shadow completely, for it is in this very situation that it becomes dangerous so that there is a violent outburst as is the case in riots. The more restrictive the society, the larger will be the shadow. Living in endless hypocrisy imposes a strain on people and some simply collapse. Hence man has to find some way of reconciling and of living in harmony with his dark side.

Jung has also interpreted the concepts of Christ and Antichrist in terms of his psychology. In his essay, "Christ, a Symbol of the Self", he sees the traditional figure of Christ as a parallel to the psychic manifestation of the self and the Antichrist as his shadow who follows in Christ's footsteps. In the ancient world, the Gnostics tackled the problem of evil by teaching that Christ "cast off his shadow from himself", hence the Antichrist. (Jung 1959: 36-71) Similarly in his essays "After the Catastrophe" and "The Fight with the Shadow" Jung explains the rise of Fascism in Germany in terms of the shadow. According to Jung, Hitler represented the shadow of the Germans, the collective forces lying dormant in the unconscious

of the Germans. The “blond beast” was stirring in an uneasy slumber after the First World War. To quote Jung, the Germans suffered from an inferiority complex and they wanted to jump over their own shadow and look for everything dark, inferior and culpable in others. Jung further describes the collective guilt of Germans, and also of the European family of nations and the Church on account of the Holocaust as the shadow (Jung 1964: 194-217, 218-26).

Yet the shadow cannot exist without light. Light and shadow form a paradoxical unity. A rainbow in the nature is, after all, also a shadow. So the shadow is not only the source of all evil but is also displays good qualities such as instinct, realistic insights, creative impulses, etc. Hence the shadow can be dark (corrupt) as well as bright (healthy), long as well as short, creative as well as destructive. In any case there is no universally accepted criterion of good and evil. No wonder Jung uses the symbols of the Chinese dragon or the snake in the European Jewish-Christian tradition for the shadow. A snake personifies commonly temptation, evil, darkness and danger; at the same time also wisdom or light. It lives in the depths just as the psyche. It is terrifying yet fascinating. (Jung 1959: 234) In other words the shadow is both a double (in discord) and a couple (complementary). The contrast is important in life. There are numerous people who are afraid of their own shadows. An important point Jung makes is that the shadow is a moral problem and no one can become conscious of it and overcome the fear of it, without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognising the dark aspects of the personality as present and real and this requires courage and above all honesty. It often involves a climb down from the cherished ideals but then these ideals were anyway raised too high or based on an illusion as in the case of Andersen’s Learned Man. The learned man was, after all, always teaching or preaching a truth in which, deep down, he did not really believe. He persistently refused to acknowledge his real self, his shadow. The recognition of the shadow, meets, as a rule, with considerable resistance.

To make the shadow conscious is the first task of Jungian psychoanalysis. After all the mental and physical health of a person

mostly depend on it. Psychology as a discipline developed only in the beginning of the 20th century. Freud and then Jung elevated it to the status of science. According to Jung, one can pursue any science with the intellect alone except psychology, whose subject is the psyche, because 'feeling' is an integral part of our conscious orientation and ought not to be missing in a psychological judgement of any scope. (Jung 1959: 32) Interestingly, creative writers have always been exploring in their own way the might of the psyche whether it was Sophocles twenty-five centuries ago or Andersen hundred and fifty years ago. The difference is that psychologists make use of the technical language of science whereas for creative writers, the richness of everyday speech is more than adequate.

#### IV

No text is created in a void. Every text, literary or philosophical, is embedded in historical and personal-existential contexts but once these historical and personal details become part of a literary discourse, they enter into new metonymic and metaphorical relations; there is a rearrangement and reconstruction of the signification of the signifiers and thus emerges the unity of the text. Most literary criticism of Andersen's tales focuses on his autobiography *The Fairy Tale of My Life* and tries to use the autobiographical details to interpret the 160 odd tales forgetting that those details have entered into new combinations. It is as if his fairy tales were nothing but reports of given events in his life which he *chose* to reveal in his autobiography. Traditional critics often refer to his poverty and sexual life (he had unhappy affairs with two women, or he was a gay, some claim he was a virgin all his life!) and the lack of recognition in his native Denmark but miserably fail to connect it with his creative writing. After all there are so many gays, but not every gay becomes an Andersen or for that matter a Socrates. This kind of biographical approach fails to take into account the creative process and its intricacies. This is perhaps the reason why literary critique on Andersen is voluminous yet meagre for it presents only the *a priori* significance of the texts. Same is true of the historical approach. Andersen's tales are rooted

in the German-Danish Romantic tradition when folk tales, folk songs, legends and myths from the waning middle ages were being collected and published. New fairy tales were also being written with a zeal that only the Germans are capable of. Andersen's motifs of the shade and the shadow, the night and the darkness, the unconscious and the intuition, the importance of the term 'poesie' as an all encompassing cultural-philosophical encounter (refer to Schlegel's definition of romantic poetry as *progressive universal poesie*) are typical of the romantic epoch. The Romantic metaphor of mine as a trope for the unconscious, signifying the deep, inward digging into the Self is a leitmotiv of Andersen's narrative. So far so good! But again, this is not enough to explain the difference between the specific discourse of Andersen and that of the other Romantics.

This article offers a semiotic-structural analysis, where gestures and existential assertions is noted carefully, drawing at the same time on psychoanalytical insights of Freud, Jung and Lacan. Every great writer has his own mode of reflection, be it the deceptive simplicity of Andersen or the condensed constructs of Rilke and Kafka. According to H.S. Gill, whose semiotic method of analysis has been applied in this essay:

There will always be the specificity of time and space and the socio-economic contradictions of the historical progression but the creative artists will continue to engage in the most humane act of thought in praxis to traverse and transcend this inevitable dialectics. (Singh 2001: xxi)

*The Shadow* is an archetypal text of the psychic mapping of individuals. It is a transcultural motif exploring the unconscious or the hinterland of a being. The selves within a being are projections of each other and are almost always engaged in a conflict. There can be no peace, no truce between the two. Sometimes one delivers a blow to the other, then the other. In many narratives there is a confrontation of the Self with the Other, wherein the Other lies clearly outside the Being. In Stevensen's novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) one aspect of personality dominates at a time. Andersen's tale is much more refined, because in it the conflict of the Other and the Self is going on all the time within the same

Being. This is, indeed, the most primordial of all human conflicts. This inner struggle makes the tale extremely complex. The doppelganger or the shadow is the fairy or the witch within, who can grant wishes as well as pronounce curses. Our dreams during sleep are manifestation of the same. If Andersen's dark tale has a moral, it is to know one's shadow, for self-knowledge is the most vital form of knowledge. The narrative only proves the age-old dictum that the simplest of things are often the most difficult to understand.

### Works Cited

- Andersen, Hans Christian** (1997). *Fairy Tales from Hans Christian Andersen*. Lisse: Rebo.
- Benjamin, Walter** (1996). *Selected Writings, Vol. I (1913-1926)*. London: Harvard.
- Gill, Harjeet Singh**. Foreword to *Rilke, Kafka, Manto. The Semiotics of Love, Life and Death* by Rosy Singh (2001). Delhi: Harman.
- Jung, Carl Gustav** (1959). *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self* (CWJ, 9, II). Trans. R.F.C. Hull. New York: Pantheon.
- . (1964). *Civilization in Transition* (CWJ, 10). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- . (1966a). *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, (CWJ, 7). Trans. R.F.C. Hull, New York: Bollingen.
- . (1966b), *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*. (CWJ, 15). Trans. R.F.C Hull. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude** (1968). *Structural Anthropology*, Trans. C. Jacobson and B. Grundfest Schoepf. Middlesex: Penguin.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude** (2001). *Myth and Meaning*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Propp, Vladimir** (1984). *Theory and History of Folklore*. Trans. A. Martin and R.P. Martin. Manchester: Manchester.
- Zipes, Jack** (ed.) (2000). *The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*. Oxford: Oxford.

## Parminder Sodhi

### Four Poems

*Translated by Gurdev Chauhan*

#### Celebrate the Now

O dweller of the future  
Why do you open  
baggage of the past  
This is too heavy  
makes my mind and body edgy  
I want to enjoy the sun of now  
I want to touch the moment of now  
resting my hands upon yours

Look for the hermit  
hiding in me  
Take him out of the blind cave  
of the past

Your look is like  
the sunlight  
Do light up my Now  
I am some Angulimal  
Come to me like  
a compassionate Buddha

I have come back from  
the jungle of yesterday  
You should also come down  
from the altitudes of future  
Today is our common ground  
Let's celebrate the moment of Now

I am to live and die  
upon the ground of here and now

You may take to the road of the future

I am a naked poor mendicant, O my girl  
you should dole out  
the moment of now  
in my begging bowl.

### **Congregation**

I called for God  
but nature  
snuggled close to me  
like thunder  
Then, we joined in prayer  
and mingled in each other

### **Solid Fluid Wind**

I gathered together  
petals of my flowering heart  
and came back  
offering them at your translucent feet

Bowed in salutation  
my being kept  
dissolving, dispersing

Now you just bless  
my liquid being to  
fly away  
to become air and fragrance

### **Something Else**

I am a lonely, infirm little bird  
sitting on the side branch  
of a tree grown in the midst  
of distant green fields

Wind, storks  
rain and sky  
pass by me

Light slow breaths have I  
and a subtle quivering  
rising of my wings  
and what else?  
There is nothing else  
to me

## **Selected Songs Sung by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan**

*Translated from Punjabi, Urdu and Hindi by Ajmer Rode*

**These songs** were translated originally as part of *Nusrat Revealed*, an international translation project to be published by Vikas Bhushan Productions based in Los Angeles, California. The project, envisioned by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and his personal physician Dr. Vikas Bhushan, aimed to translate selected qawwalis and lyrics sung by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and publish them in a book accompanied by a CD. An international team of about a dozen accomplished translators, including Dr. Coleman Barks, Dr. Christopher Shackle (Oxford), Dr. Philip Nilolayev (Harvard), Dr. Mabel Khawaja (Hampton University) was assembled. I ended up translating 18 songs (perhaps the greatest number). The status of the project, started enthusiastically after Nusrat's death, has now been unknown for more than a decade.

### ***A note on Sufi poetry and its translation***

Repetition is of central importance to Sufi practice. Sufis dance in circles, sing the same lines for hours, and write poetry with no hesitation to repeat. Words, lines, images recur freely. Repetition reinforces the theme and helps induce the ecstatic trance. In Nusrat's singing too repetition mesmerized his audience.

The English translation, however, is intended for the modern reader who seems averse to repetition. Economy has been a hallmark of modern poetry. In translating Nusrat's songs I have attempted a balance. As for images I have tried to leave them intact, for repeating words I have tried to substitute synonyms where they did not affect the theme significantly, and in the case of lines I have repeated them but minimally. The repetition of lines hardly adds anything and may rather annoy the reader. That is why most western translations of Sufi poetry hardly show repeating lines. In my view, however, occasional repetition of a line or two preserves

the spirit of the original.

The same holds for rhyming, a prominent feature of Sufi poetry. Modern English poetry has abandoned hard rhyme. But again, to reflect the spirit of the original I have moved between rhyming and no-rhyming. Also I have moved freely between literal and literary translation to be as close to the original as possible without sacrificing its elegance and simplicity.

Finally, I believe some key concepts like ‘separation’ and ‘saki’ need to be understood in depth to really appreciate the Sufi poetry.

*Ajmer Rode*

### **Return My Heart to Me**

If you can't stay close to my eyes  
return my heart to me, my love

How I trusted your love, my beloved  
I let my heart wander on your word  
Can't bear myself ever away from you  
Return my heart to me, my love

Time doesn't move in your absence  
I ask no more than a mere glance  
If you can't accept such a small plea  
Return my heart to me, my love

If only you could bare your inside  
I would show you my inner tide. If you  
won't company me for a moment or two  
return my heart to me, my love

You wish to leave me forever, I  
shall wait for you till I crumble  
to dust. I cherish my pains gone by

### **My Heart My Life**

You are my heart you are my life  
my gracious love, life of my life  
My gaze will never tire  
stay ever in my sight  
Oh fair one, my darling  
my age-mate, my intimate

You may know or not know, you  
are my pride, my glow. I have found  
you, you are my beloved graceful  
You are my heart, you are my life

You adorn me, you embellish me  
you are my love, I say endlessly  
You are my heart, you are my life

Make no excuses, think of me  
speak to me, I want nothing  
but your company. Helpless is  
my heart, what's my fault!  
Can't stay far, oh beloved lord!

Come, end my yearning, end  
this unbearable separation  
God knows my eyes dream  
nothing but our union  
You are my heart, you are my life.

### **This Delicate Ecstasy**

At a mere glance by the saki<sup>1</sup> I nodded and drank  
Playing with the waves I whirled<sup>2</sup> and drank  
How could I dare drink without dignity  
the peak of my passion unnerved me and I drank

This delicate ecstasy  
is the fault of your glances  
that initiated me into drinking

My love of you my longing for you  
and the stray glances from you  
have made me a drunk  
I know your gestures, saki. It's your eyes  
that intoxicate, the brimful goblet is a  
mere excuse  
Your stray glances have made me a drunk

What is this drink and this intoxication  
without your favors. The way your eyes  
serve me I will drink myself to oblivion  
Your stray glances have made me a drunk

I have ever been a man of love, never  
worried of infidelity. My head has found your  
door, I seek the harem no more. My  
worship is a worship not bound to a holy place,  
a glimpse of you is no less than a prayer

On the doomsday I'll rise with a  
scar of your love. Your image too  
will be stuck close to my heart. For, your  
love is my life your memory my worship  
Your happiness is my happiness. It's a  
miracle of my passion that wherever  
I bow my head a Kaaba rises there

Who would you torment after I am gone?  
It's not sane to play around with losers in love,  
not sane to expect joy from the sobbing souls  
I have lost my heart, oh, I've lost my heart  
in this game, have seen the fruit of  
falling in love. I've lost my heart so I lament,  
what've you gained that you rejoice!

Who will you torment when I'm gone? You'll  
repent for life for spurning me. Who will  
you wreak havoc on when I am finished, how  
will you erase me from your memory, who  
will you aim at afresh?  
Cherish my friendship, raise your hands to  
pray for me that I have made you a killer  
Look at me, the desire of my life! I am  
the same fading star of your bygone days  
You weren't this aware then, restrain your tongue,  
be grateful to me, my gracious one, I've taught you  
the art of conversing

This delicate ecstasy  
is the fault of your glances  
that have made me a drunk

### **My Eyes Yearn**

What good is my life, my friend,  
without you?  
My every pore my every pulse resonates  
as I remember you

My eyes yearn my heart calls  
come back, my faraway friend, my love begs  
Come, my eyes yearn to see you.

Ever since you've been cross with me  
crows have forgotten to call on my house<sup>3</sup>  
Come, my eyes yearn to see you.

Without you, my love, I feel lonesome  
You don't belong where you've gone  
Come, my eyes yearn to see you.

I am tired gazing at your way,

weary, living alone day after day  
My heart counts every moment it beats  
Come, my eyes yearn to see you

My heart throbs when the easterly blows,  
trembles, when somewhere a crow crows  
The spring mocks my loneliness  
Come, my eyes yearn to see you

### **Memories of My Separated Love**

Memories of my separated love descend,  
my eyes rain  
Would that separations in the world end,  
my eyes rain

Where have you, the blessed one, hidden?  
My hopes bloom then die in your separation  
Desires cry out to no end, my eyes rain

When I remember the love of my darling  
clouds of pain agitate my feelings  
The noose of suffering dangles, my eyes rain

### **I Don't Rest for A Wink**

I don't rest for a wink without you, my friend  
I sink into loneliness without you, my friend

Would that no lover has to suffer exile  
no one has to endure separation without end  
I don't rest for a wink without you, my friend

A thousand ailments sorrows and pinings  
mask my love for you. They suffer doomsday  
everyday who miss their lovers every moment.  
I don't rest for a wink without you, my friend.

At night I burn tears to light the lamp  
aWhy don't you, oh God, end our separation  
I don't rest for a wink without you, my friend.

### **You Are Sitting by My Side**

You're sitting by my side, death is powerless  
Death I welcome but it won't stop my breath.

Your gestures! your graceful company!  
I would sacrifice my heart for you. But  
how would you handle my heart when  
you can't hold your falling scarf

Hearing my wails stones are thawed!  
The stones have melted but not your heart

Advice of the sheikh is good,  
of the councilor great. But  
when the dark clouds dance  
I can't help reaching for the goblet

See the journey of my coffin! Shoulders  
keep changing. And here they carry  
your palanquin, nobody wants to change

Drinkers drink then steady themselves  
but those who drink from your eyes  
stagger for the rest of their lives

### **Shahbaz Qalandar**

Save my honor, oh Jhoolay Lal<sup>4</sup> of  
Sindh, oh Shahbaz Qalandar<sup>5</sup> of Sehwan,

every breath you take dips in ecstasy  
utters Ali Ali Ali...

Four lamps burn here eternally, I've  
come to kindle the fifth on your sanctuary  
Every breath you take dips in ecstasy...  
High is your shrine, my pir,  
and the river underneath flows calmly  
Every breath you take dips in ecstasy...

You gift children to mothers, and unite  
brethren to sisters in melancholy  
Every breath you take dips in ecstasy...

Dhanan dhanan beats your drum  
and the gong joins in ritually  
Every breath you take dips in ecstasy  
utters Ali Ali Ali...

### **Ganj-e-shakar<sup>6</sup>**

Ganj-e-shakar my graceful lord  
my baba matchless my baba wondrous  
the sublime pir of Sabir<sup>7</sup>  
the true guardian of my honor

My life my heart is baba Farid  
He is my virtue my religion  
I am his servant faithful  
Ganj-e-shakar dwells in my soul

When a tide of distress overwhelmed  
I ran to my baba adored  
He always protected me, embraced me tight  
Why would I go to strangers

when my honor my religion is baba Farid

Ganj-e-shakar my graceful lord  
I am his servant faithful

### **Yad-e-nabi<sup>8</sup>**

Fragrant is the garden of our nabi's memories  
Seems the lord is present in our company

His eyes lined with kohl of the sacred Mazag<sup>9</sup>  
and head crowned with the divine Ta-ha<sup>10</sup>,  
how could I say the lord looks like you and me  
On my lips are the songs of Allah's praise  
in my hands a fakir's bowl,  
see how good this Lord's beggar appears to be!

Fragrant is the garden of our nabi's memories  
Seems the lord is present in our company

### **Allah Mohammad and the four friends**

Allah, Mohammad and his four friends,  
Haji, Khwaja, Qutab, Baba Farid —  
Those who revere these names  
earn their passage to Heaven.

Who would be our guide without them  
Who could be our beloved if none of them  
I, nay, the whole world says,  
a glimpse of Baba is a glimpse of Him.

**Gazal: Unki Taraf Se**

What I feared has finally happened  
She has called off our meeting

She met someone or the night fell early  
Or some other excuse stopped her coming

The mirror surprized her today  
She met with herself for the first time

Just a visit it was to her lovesick adorer  
But tears tell something soulful happened

Who else was there to comfort me  
You've come I am already healing

How far, Qamar, will you trust her promise  
the Sun's sunk the night already humming

**To My Beloved Friend**

*A Song by Guru Gobind Singh*

Tell my beloved friend  
the conditions I, his devotee, face.

Without you, I pull a quilt over and sicken,  
live in the company of snakes.

The wine flask is a crucifix, the cup a dagger,  
to drink is to bear a butcher's blade.

Better to mourn at my friend's pallet  
than to burn in the in-laws' palace.  
Tell my beloved friend the conditions his devotee faces.

**Gazal: Fāsle Gul Hai**

Away is my love, nearby glows a tavern:  
listen my heart, it's a call from the tavern.

To sit, and see the evening glide by  
what place is better than a tavern  
Perhaps a drinker has mailed this letter,  
the address on it reads: The tavern

The moment her looks turned unkind,  
cruel to me has become the whole tavern

How can I give it up, councilor, sir,  
with luck have I found the tavern.

**I Have Forgotten His World**

I have forgotten His world  
not the thoughts of you  
Come back, my love,  
I cannot forget you.

My eyes are stuck on your way  
I cannot go on without you  
Reverse your journey, my love,  
I cannot forget you.

Rivers swell in my eyes  
Where have you, my love, winged to  
A moment's separation becomes centuries  
I cannot forget you.

I have lost myself waiting for you  
What do I possess without you

You win I lose, my love,  
I cannot forget you.

### **Haven't Seen**

There isn't much, O Muhammad, I haven't seen  
But a beloved like you, yes, I have not seen.

Men of great beauty, O prophet, I've seen many  
But one beyond your beauty, no, I have not seen.

Show Me the Path of Sharah<sup>11</sup> Later

Show me the path of sharah later  
Let me first worship my lover  
Let me sit at his door, a Kaaba to me  
Show me the path of sharah later  
Leaving my rosary, my mat of worship,  
let me enter the street of my friend  
Let me bow at my lover's door  
Show me the path of sharah later

Lead me not to any other path  
Ask me not to follow if you're stuck  
Let me sit at the feet of my lover  
Show me the path of sharah later

Do not hinder my devotion to love  
Do not stop me worshipping statues  
Let me sit before my love and savor  
Show me the path of sharah later

### **Ghazal: Aaj Koi Baat Ho Gai**

The day rolls ominously to a naught  
the night has come my love has not

The moment he wills to unite with me  
my alienation from the world stops  
When he comes to see me at midnight  
the moon rises to show me his path

When he estranges me little by little  
the whole world shuns me fast

the prisoner of the evening sorrow  
has died, the pains freed him at last.

I too am sad, my sobbing heart,  
the honor of my love is scared

He has for once come to my house,  
Purnam, the ecstasy will forever last.

1. *Saki: the wine pourer*

2. *Alludes to the Sufi dance in which dancers whirl to achieve ecstatic trance.*

3. *In Indian folklore if a crow calls on the parapet of your house it is considered a*

*good omen; it heralds the arrival of a dear one.*

4. *Jhoolay Lal: A 10<sup>th</sup> century folk hero of Sindh who saved women's honor from foreign invaders.*

5. *Lal Shahbaz Qalandar: A 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi saint of Sehwan who preached love among Hindus and Muslims.*

6. *Ganj-e-shakar is a title of baba Sheikh Farid, the famous 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi saint.*

7. *Sabir was a disciple of Sheikh Farid.*

8. *nabi: prophet*

9. *Mazag refers to the night in a Quranic verse in which prophet Muhammad ascends to the heavens to meet the Lord.*

10. *Ta-ha refers to the revelations recorded in the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Quran.*

11. *Sharah: religious law according to Quran.*

## Sartaj

### *The Heron and Other Poems*

#### **The Heron**

Through a gap in the endless row of trucks  
in the traffic jam where we were stuck  
I saw him in the waterlogged paddy field  
probing for worms in the muck

The paddy field was a fresh green  
and the grove beyond shaded dark  
where coconut and areca nut trees  
shaded meandering mossy paths

My thoughts stayed behind in that gap  
and with the carefree heron flew  
when he quietly flapped away  
against the distant mountains blue

On my ankles I felt the cold wetness  
and the grass stalks brushed my leg  
my toes squelched in the wet mud  
and I smiled at the clouds overhead

#### **The Little Goatherd**

Little yellow flowers that look like stars  
are strewn across the grass  
and big white ones grow in clumps  
all over the hill that we pass  
The goats come streaming around the bend  
suddenly appearing out of the mist

and then in a torn sweater and worn shorts  
she comes running, waving a stick;  
the other hand held out for balance  
her matted hair flying in the wind

Her slippers too big for her, her legs far too thin  
clumsily she runs and shouts, creating such a din

Pushing back the hair from her face,  
she stops for a moment to see  
and before she's reclaimed by the task at hand  
smiles a shy smile at me

Like a song from long ago, all tune and no words: a memory  
often fondly remembered, but almost never sung  
Like a gurgling stream, heard but seldom seen, the smile  
is lost in the serious face that seems far too young  
And she no bigger than the four-eyed dogs that alongside loll  
with their moist black noses and big pink tongues

And off she goes into the mist, her face like melancholy prose  
a mere child and see how she goes after her herd of goats

### **You'll Understand (When You Have Kids of Your Own)**

There's an owlet on the electric wires  
watching over the empty plot  
amidst high rises, waiting  
by the street light for the larger moths

I see it sitting alone and my heart skips a beat  
I've seen electrocuted bats draped in singed leather  
The little owlet has large wings and  
the wires are close together

## **A Goodbye Note**

You sit there in your borrowed suit, live, drunk  
and he asks you where the poetry comes from  
love, sadness, frustration? All that and more, you add  
with a wan smile and a vague wave of your hand  
But no, there's never been a paucity of love in my life  
with women coming and going my days have been rife  
Of course, but is there anything, he then ventures  
that you ever really loved: a thing, person, maybe a picture?

For some reason my heart begins to wildly beat  
as in a lightning premonition that I wouldn't admit  
I already know your answer that I don't want to hear  
That picture did or could never exist, for all I loved were  
someone's hair, another's fingers, sometimes lips or just feet  
but that picture that i would love, was never complete  
I've been sitting very still, though unable to speak  
and only now does a bitter tear roll down my cheek

Don't blame me and I won't hold it against you, for again  
we both know that you're married to your idea of love, your pain  
That you've sold yourself to the audience; your life, in your  
wretched words  
and you know they love you for it, for your heart-rending verse  
for your morbid tales of love lost that you embellish with rhyme  
So while I pack my bags to leave 'coz I know you can never be  
mine  
you sit there reciting for them your miserable ballad of love  
forlorn  
You belong to the poem you'll write, mourning when I'm gone

### **Hope is the Thing with Feathers**

I was seven at the time and we used to stay  
in a dusty three-storied government apartment –  
Papa was a clerk in the provincial commerce department –  
and in the dirt courtyard with ashoka trees we used to play  
On a fine sunny morning when the mustard was ripe  
I remember I went up to throw  
from the terrace a dead crow  
hoping it'd come alive  
and glide away.

### **A Lonely Patch of Sky**

In the courtyard of the abandoned  
house, where not a soul does dwell  
hidden in the weeds overgrown  
stands the broken well

The inside's stained mossy green  
with patches bleached white  
and a ficus grows from a crack  
its leaves peeking over the side

Stones for steps spiral down  
disappearing into the thick fern  
and right at the bottom, a brilliant blue sky  
to see a face does yearn

### **Blinding White and Very Dusty**

Getting over these white hot days  
is not going to be very tough and anyway  
I'm something of an expert in these matters, I trust  
you know. So go on, leave, if you must  
Guess I'll find another muse  
and anyway the seasons will never refuse

to go on changing forever. And every time it rains  
lashing the dry fields it'll yield enough pain

to draw from me a line or two  
There's time until the rains, it's true  
but even until then the scorching sunlight dusty  
or the copperpod buds that a week ago were rusty

and now carpet the hot ground pale brown with a soft yellow  
or the kites soaring in the late evenings mellow  
are enough to keep me going until the grey skies overcast  
finally enfold me in cool deep shadows dark

And then soon as I smell the soil quenching its thirst  
and hear the drops splatter the leaves in the year's first  
rain, I'll rush out to get drenched squelching dripping wet  
and these days hot and rasping dry I'll promptly forget

The whole world has loved and lost so it's nothing new  
See? there are things that I long for other than you  
Other things I'll get over and other things that I'll forget  
other things I am slave to, to pay off their debt

So go on, not a line for you will I write  
a hundred poems of parting, a thousand lamenting sighs  
a hundred thousand songs of longing all long overdue  
a million aching syllables and not one of them for you

### **An Early-Winter Evening Walk**

The distant silhouetted poplars lean  
conspiratorially all to the same degree  
gossiping about the electric poles who stand  
lopsided, tipping this way and that  
like puppets slumped, with lank wires linked  
or like they've had a bit too much to drink

full-tight, scattered, still, the whole lot  
lost in their world of abstracted thought  
lost, in the vast expanse of the bare fields  
relieved for now of the monsoon yield  
and a mob of babblers, bunny-hopping, flies by  
loudly cursing both the poles and the poplars sly  
loving each other's company but being obdurate  
loudly refusing to agree about who is more to berate  
They fly arguing from tree to bush unable to decide  
and over the hay stacked high by the roadside  
that's rustling with something bustling inside, probably rats  
that the dog that's taken up my trail pauses to sniff at  
There's the smell of hay and smoke and dung and  
buffaloes in the air from the temporary gujjar camp  
that rises with the dust raised by the speeding van  
that rattles by disjointedly making the dog look askance  
Having changed colour the setting red sun  
disappears before it's even reached the horizon  
leaving the distant trees, blue with longing, untouched  
and the dog and me to see if we'd get along, if we'd match up

### **There's Still Hope**

For there are yet  
in places you don't know  
long trains of cycles that go  
one behind the other at dawn and dusk  
churning slush in the monsoon and  
at other times raising dust

there is still hope for us  
places where we can be free  
there is still hope that  
one of these days you will  
listen to your heart and  
come away with me.

## Usha Kishore

### *Three Poems*

#### **Losing Mother**

Losing mother is like losing heritage.  
When you are not there, when you cannot  
even attend her funeral, when you feel  
your home is not your home anymore.

Hushed voices travel across flowing seas  
lamenting in tides, across silent air sighing  
in fire, across winds carrying whispers from  
the past. I mark time in the falling light, the fleeing  
bird and the pale moon, a wreath unadorned.

I mourn in mother tongue, mother's language,  
its vowels and consonants formed in the darkness  
of the womb, like verse rising from the soul;  
the rhythm of speech forming in limbo, drumming  
in placental delusion, stringing an unknown memory  
into melody; a foetal reverie, a tradition in translation.

I chant the genres of poetry, my mother taught me,  
as in a farewell mantra: *Rahasyavaad*, *Chhayavaad*,  
*Prayogvaad*, *Pragativaad*, *Ashavaad*.  
Tears flow in a flood of metonyms, melting  
the piercing darkness of Winter Solstice.

*Rahasyavaad*: Mysticism. *Chhayavaad*: Neo-romanticism.  
*Prayogvaad*: Experimentalism. *Pragativaad*: Progressivism.  
*Ashavaad*: Optimism. All these are genres of Hindi poetry.

## **The Perfume Makers**

*Inspired by Rudolf Ernst's painting*

Perfumed shadows rise in wisps from the blue and yellow  
marble kiln, as dawn pours in *fougères* of an azure realm  
that sharply contrasts with the ochred walls. A girl brings

in the perfumes of Arabia in a basket, sedately poised  
on her slender shoulder. Her dark hair coiffured  
in a damask turban, tumbles out in *attared* curls.

Her shadow lingers somewhere like the desert breeze, which  
has stealthily followed her floral footsteps. She pauses at  
the doorway, as if in a trance. Her supple hands eloquent

like those of a *ghaziya* dancer, her redolent yellow robes  
summoning the sun. Her cascading youth forms a *repoussoir*,  
framing the open archway. She is *taif*, perfume of the soul.

Her eyes shut, she breathes a spell, cloaked in golden myrrh  
that catches the sultan's turret in a noose of light. Damask roses  
strew the carpet in a whiff of dreams. The woman at the kiln

croons a *rubai* that distils fragrant thoughts into the large blue  
earthen jar – Vetiver, Musk, YlangYlang, Jasmine, Sandalwood,  
Patchouli – all to be embalmed in the chiaroscuro of pictorial space.

The old man in the corner, another Omar Khayyam, weaver  
of magic words, summons the genie of flowers in oriental hues.  
Dawn pauses in eternal glaze and waits for the *bedouin* pot

in lacquered brass to whistle its ambered notes that waft past  
the whispering porcelain jars, past the lone brass plate singing  
on the kiln, past the lamp-stand praying to the air, and touch the  
sky.

The boy on the floor counts innocent roses into his little urn, only to be framed in mahogany and cedar, to be auctioned for the price of gold that travels across the world in sensuous Arabian scents.

### **Monsoon Gold**

Monsoons bring in fragrances of the Arabian Sea, *attar* and *miskghazala* that glimmer in puddles, like drops of opal. Here, I read the golden yarns of Scheherazade, ablaze with jewelled conceits.

Aureate serpents dance with gems on their hoods and fireflies kindle the falling dusk. From dark woods, crow-pheasants purl of a love that is never to be, as rainclouds hang from the sky in shadows of rainbow. From east to west, a lulling breeze sweeps the moonlit courtyard.

Monsoons bind me to that lost world, where amber spills on the streets, washing away the grime of false truths that I once chose to believe. My skin tingles with sand, kissed by November rains. A sprig of jasmine, plucked from yesteryears, lights up my dreams into the early hours of a Manx morning, its rising sun burying monsoon gold in the pebbled beach.

## **Nabina Das**

### *Two Poems*

#### **Justice Song**

The hanging comes to town  
Did you hear?  
The hanging comes to town  
Did you know we'll eat sweets after the hanging?  
Did you know we may celebrate with a cake?  
Do you know —  
The dead man came to town decades ago  
Did you know?  
The dead man came on a bullock cart then  
The dead man comes in a sedan now  
Do you know how many of them?  
Did you know you'll win gold if you touched the dead man's  
feet?  
Do you know the gold will weigh in bars?  
So many dead, oh  
So much gold, ah  
Did you know the hanged man's feet will turn a root?  
Do you know how those roots are snaking inside us?  
You must chew the root  
You must touch the feet  
And see the gold bars sit on your chest  
They'll be heavy, they'll choke  
And your dreams will get hanged  
Did you know they will?  
Still you must scream — die die die.

**dana, dana...a despair song**

Dana Manjhi can walk on bare feet  
they say Dana did not need any help  
but Dana knows no waiting  
and Dana lugs a stiff dead body  
the dead wife in stiffening flesh  
turning to perspiration dew and stench  
Dana walks miles like athletes and miles and miles  
the roads do not smile and Dana walks miles  
They call him and say he's a liar  
he did not wait to bow and beg  
he lugged a cloth-wrapped body instead  
Dana has seen the world dana dana  
every single grain denied to him dana dana  
They say respect is not his password  
Dana says waiting was longer than him trudging  
in every grain of sand he tramples, every dana  
Dana knew his fate disintegrating dana dana.

*Book Reviews*

**M. L. Raina**

***Poems of Paul Celan***

Translated from German by Michael Hamburger

Persea Books, NY

Pages 358

\$15.95

**The Holocaust** was a watershed in twentieth century's history. The systematic destruction of nearly six million Jews by the Nazi war machine was perhaps the ultimate in human bestiality whose parallel may still not be available today in spite of numerous postwar genocides in Asia, Africa and, most recently, Kosovo. Perhaps the enormity of the Nazi crime made Adorno wonder whether poetry was possible after Auschwitz. George Steiner, endorsing Adorno's despair, thought language itself incapable of accommodating the magnitude, the degradation of what he called the 'shoah'. Franz Lanzman in his film "Shoah" was similarly sceptical about ever rendering the crime into a truthful expression.

In his book *In Bluebird's Castle* Steiner raised the question: "What kind of rationality, what kind of ordered logic of the human social and psychological circumstance, what processes of rational analysis and causal explanation, are available to language after the cancer of reason, the travesty of all meaningfulness, enacted in the Shoah?" There is an element of hopelessness in these words aggravated by the fact that there have been many survivors of the carnage who have remembered and who continue to remind us that the Holocaust must not be forgotten because it signals the total breakdown of human rationality in the face of overwhelming evil. Writers on the Holocaust have seen this evil as total and unamenable to explanation. Hence the calls to silence, to suffer the inexpressible and be the living embodiments of the unspoken and the unspeakable. Hence also the relevance of poets such as Paul Celan.

Though historians and theologians have found evil inexpressible in logical terms, poets and artists have found their own means of expressing it. Elie Weisel, a distinguished writer and survivor has proposed that “poetry exists so that the dead can vote.” Bertolt Brecht went so far as to assert in reply to a question whether “there will be singing in the dark times”: “yes there will be singing/about the dark times.” In spite of Eliot complaining that words are inadequate to express the intensity of feelings, poets have spoken of the Holocaust in varying ways. Surprisingly it is the poets rather than novelists and dramatists who have come to grips with the Nazi terror in a manner that is unique and distinctive. Not surprisingly, though, it is the post-war German poets who have expressed the urgency in which the language dilemma brought on by the Shoah becomes the dilemma of the German language itself.

Herein is the significance of Paul Celan. Only he, amongst a galaxy of significant postwar poets, gives the “the apocalypse of the inhuman” its calendar as well as its hallucinatory clarity. ‘Hallucinatory clarity’ might sound contradictory to the common ear. But to those who have lived through the dark days, this is precisely how it must have felt when the shadow of death and the gas ovens were the only certainties the victims could know. It is in this sense that Celan’s poetry is both a poetry of extremity and a poetry of witness, often together and simultaneously. As Steiner says, with Celan in mind, “as to speech about God, what forms can it take... after the death camps?”

Celan’s is a poetry of extremity in the sense that extreme situations like war, exile, violation of language take on an abstract purity, a disembodied generality whose effects do not depend on the sufferings of individual victims. Here he differs very much from American confessional poets such as Lowell and Berryman. The absence of the personal ‘I’ from the most anthologized poem ‘Death Fugue’ distances the experience described from immediate circumstance. “Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening/we drink it midday morning we drink it at night/we drink and we drink/we shovel a grave in the air /there you won’t lie too cramped.”

In one sense this is an Auschwitz poem (a reply to Adorno that poems after the event are possible). In another sense the

cold horrors of the camp never cry out for attention in the way overtly confessional poets cry out to us. The repetitiveness of phrases (*we drink it*, for example), and the surrealist nature of the imagery in much of the poem combine with the intricate musical structure implied in the title to remove the poem from immediate historical events and convey it to that realm where history becomes a larger human concern than simple event. Short of becoming transcendent in any mystical/mythical way, it continues to resonate through epochs and periods wherein similar experiences have occurred.

The extremity of its theme is preserved in the iterated reminders of death (“death is a master from Deutschland”) as well as in the silences and absences so palpably impressed between stanzas. Compared with the poetry of a fellow German, Johannes Bobrowski who retains a lyrical core within the evocations of present-day horror, Celan in this poem continues to focus on the present, particularly its strange illusions in the midst of outrage. The particular pathos and power of the poem is revealed in the partly hidden and partly evident balance the poet is able to maintain between what is undoubtedly the most unpoetic material and the pure poetic form towards which it tends.

Celan is a witness poet apart from being the poet of extremity. As a Romanian Jew settled in France and writing poetry in German, he has been a witness to both the destruction of his native country by the Nazis and to the defiling of the language of his composition by the lies and contaminations of the Nazi propaganda. He has heard the “shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells” (Wilfred Owen). In Owen, the dead are mourned not by praying relatives but by the cacophony of new technologies without the healing comfort of religion. For Celan, the attacks on Jews as a people conflict with the illusion (or shall we say actual belief) of being the chosen people. He has been a witness to the systematic and efficient project of elimination of his people, but his response is not the shrill cry, but a silent refusal to accept the divinity of God who can allow such practice.

In the poem titled ‘Psalm’, he refuses to call God by his name but refers to him as ‘No-one’: “No-one kneads us again out of

earth and loam/No-one bespeaks our dust. /No-one. Praise unto thee, No one? For love of you will we bloom? Towards/Against you.” The No-one God is an analogue to the No-one Jew whose collective and individual extinction is the burden of this remarkable poem. The extinction of the Jew is for Celan the very extinction of the human race itself. Yet the Jewish nothingness is “in bloom,” is not to be written off permanently. Reading these lines you at once make connections with Yeats’s ‘terrible beauty’ which is both destructive and beautiful, a phoenix-like emergence from the ashes.

In most of the poems in this splendid selection by Michael Hamburger, himself a poet of considerable merit, we move not through verifiable statements but through lived parables and animated metaphors. The fact that Celan wrote in the language of his murderers (itself a defiance of Adorno’s despair), and the fact that he committed suicide in 1970, long after the Holocaust, hint at one thing and one thing alone: the urgent need to confront the weapons of his poetry against the battering realities of language’s limitations and the choking inadequacies of the language itself. In poem after poem in this selection – ‘The Lock Gate’, ‘Coagula’, to name only a few – there is a sense that language itself is insufficient for the particular poetic ends to which Celan has consecrated himself. This adds further pathos to a poet who seeks pure form that would hold the impure realities of his experience.

Celan’s critics – and there are many – berate him for aspiring to a sanitised hermetic form. In a sense this is true. But the hermeticism of his formal mission is like the supposed hermeticism of Joyce’s language. Both aspired towards a form that entailed the cracking, the splitting and the fragmenting of the available resources of language in order to accommodate their peculiar epic visions. It is true that Celan is not accessible either to summary analysis or to easy appropriation by critics with a palpable design of ideology over his work. To retain his individual sanctity against the dialect of the tribe, Celan, again like Joyce, rifles through his language, tilts the music of his rough diction against the false sonorities of accepted music, chops and stretches words and syntax to throw away its dead-worn commonplaces All in the service of a muse that is

restless, itinerant and always on the lookout for fresh meanings:  
“With all my thoughts I/ went out of the world: and there you were/  
you, my quiet, my open one/ and you received us. /Who says  
everything died for us when our eyes broke?/ Everything awakened,  
everything brightened.”

It is at this point that Celan’s ‘flurrying metaphors’ and  
‘landscapes with urn creatures’ come up to greet and challenge us  
into thinking.

## Shane Joseph

### *Love Triangle, A Novel in Terza Rima, and 160 Sonnets*

By Ben Antao

Cinnamon Teal, Margao (2014)

**Ben Antao** takes a departure from his usual fiction, memoir and travelogue to render all three forms in verse in this entertaining combination of “Dante meets Shakespeare.”

The first part of the book is an adaptation of Antao’s earlier novel, *Penance*, into an epic poem written in the *terza rima* format - a rhyming verse stanza form that consists of an interlocking three-line rhyme scheme used by Dante Alighieri- and rendered in 19 cantos. Unlike the novel, which takes a longer time to make its mark, this verse version gets right to the point – the central event – an adulterous affair between a family man and a lesbian, and the tragic fallout. But this is also where Dante leaves and Shakespeare takes over, bringing key themes from his sonnets into the cantos: the brevity of life, the transience of beauty and the trappings of desire; and, like in all of the Bard’s tragedies, littering the stage with bodies at curtain call.

The emotions expressed and explored in *Love Triangle* rage back and forth across all affected parties, and the form allows for this jumping around, and also accommodates the melodramatic ending with its lyrical verse, something the novel needs a lot more play and objectivity to unravel. The verse version cuts out a lot of non-essential characters and scenes from the novel, and is a gripping read. On the debit side, the search for words that rhyme can sometimes provide adds levity where it is uncalled for, and, I feel, the form boxes the novelist in.

In the second part, the Sonnets, Antao outdoes Shakespeare by writing 160 of them to the Bard’s 154. In these sonnets, Shakespeare departs and Dante takes over, and Antao roams not the other worlds but our present one: from Goa to Italy, to France to North America; he explores famous personalities like the Pope, Mother Teresa and the Impressionist Painters to not-so-famous

ones like personal friends and mentors, and he reserves a section to honour his Italian mother-in-law by titling her the Princess of Pachino. This second part of the book could have been assembled better for it follows no particular order, and scenes from Toronto suddenly appear next to ones in Goa, and then we jump to Las Vegas and on to Winnipeg and back to the Pyrenees, a Dante on steroids, indeed! I would have liked to have seen distinct sections on People (all those mentioned above and more), Places (separated between North American and European locales) and Home (Goa).

For it is in the Goan sections that Antao comes into his own. Given that these sonnets, each comprising 14 lines of rhyming verse, cannot go further than to record an observation, an impression, a background, or a feeling about the subject, in the Goan pieces Antao does more and reveals the character and psyche of Goa. He outlines how Goans (and writers!) drink, why they migrate, why they gamble; he portrays funeral ceremonies and wedding ceremonies, snake charmers and toddy tappers, the markets of Margao, the rains where *grasshoppers among folks rush to the mill to get the paddy dehusked*, fishing in Nuem, the sumptuous food, and the language of his homeland – a rich cultural portrait of a once Portuguese colony now being encircled and subsumed by Mother India.

Antao has lived a rich life, much of which he has chronicled in his past work, be they novels, short stories, memoirs and travelogues. Now he has sat back to take that body of work and add music to it and convert his art to a higher form, the one closest to the gods, they say: poetry. I suspect he is having a lot of fun doing it while he gives his readers the pleasure of sharing in the results.

## Rajesh Sharma

### *This Summer and That Summer*

Sanjeev Sethi

Bloomsbury, 2015

Rs. 199

**This is** Sanjeev Sethi's third book of poetry. He lives in Mumbai, the city that has given more than its fair share to Indian poetry in English. It is a short and cool book – the cover says this visually, with paper boats and a miniature iceberg, home-frozen – to be sipped between short intervals on summer mornings after breakfast. Most poems speak personally – they are confessional, as they phrase it in academic jargon. Some, like 'Realization', are simply remarkable. Their force is direct, measured. Here is a sip, for taste:

Here I'm,  
mindful of my mistakes.  
Now what?

I guess Nissim Ezekiel liked Sethi's poetry for this, and for the sudden knot in a straight running rope, sudden but expected if you are awake to the mildly grotesque animating the banal:

I envy the arrogance of those who pee  
with their hands on their waist.

Such fortune escapes most fat men. ('Capsules')

Surely, Sethi is at his finest when he is himself, and is not straining to scrape any heavens. 'How do you tell them?' he writes in 'Metropolis', 'It aches to look up all the time.' I wish he didn't look up so often: all poems he writes would then be as good. I have re-read more than once 'Pigeons', 'Name', '*In Situ*, Bangkok', 'Aesthetics', and 'Fingerprint'. I love 'Pigeons'. Sethi too does, I suspect: he opens the book with it. The very first line repays the price, in money and time, you have expended on the book: 'Pigeons have no tenancy laws.'

'I like clichés,' you read in 'Holograph'. The narrator-character in the poem might like them; certainly not the poet. He

avoids them like the plague. But he is enthralled by alliteration – it is his ‘quibble’, to recall Johnson on Shakespeare – which he iterates and reiterates because he somehow overrates it, until you choke on it, and it begins to run like a running nose out of your only two poor ears. Here is an instance:

When the wind of words  
Fill in  
For my failings in form. (*Shangri-La*)  
And here another:  
Vaunts of veneries are not  
Woven into my vocabulary. (‘Apophysis’)

But if he is being ironic, I am afraid he is being dangerously so, and risks too much. Also, irony cannot be that surplus. I wish he had cultivated, after two books, an ear that would be hurt by too much alliteration. Not many readers have a taste for adolescent mushiness which sticks out of even the titles of many poems, like oversweet jam spilling out of sandwiches made by ham-handed husbands.

At times, Sethi’s metaphors fall stillborn, as if he hadn’t cared to give life to them: ‘Afterlife’ is an example. But in ‘Garrison Report’ the metaphor takes off at once, sure-winged, and lifts the whole poem along.

If the book is an uneven achievement, the responsibility lies also with the publishers: Bloomsbury does not have, it appears, any poetry editors. They have given an elegantly produced book but not a well-edited one, if editing involves more than proofing. On his part, Sethi could have edited out a lot; no doubt, the book would have been much leaner – it’s already only 53 pages.

But poets wait. Ghalib did. So did Rilke.

## Sapna Dogra

### *Hyphenated*

By Mihir Chitre

Sahitya Akademi: Delhi, 2014

Pages 111

ISBN 978-8126046225

*Hyphenated* is a collection of sixty-four poems by Mihir Chitre, a Mumbai-based advertisement professional. This is his first book of poems. These are poems of the cityscape that merges the personal and the public, the self and the city, and assumptions and observations. The poems are an eloquent mix of jagged humour, lyricism edged with cynicism, and lost love. The poet K Satchidanandan says in the blurb that Chitre's "is a magic world of barbecued afternoons, women unfolding like short stories, nights like infinite staircases, city as a vortex of ancient water, breeze that climbs the decrepit barricade of his coy childhood like a thief, loquacious ripples on the taciturn lake and book marks like broken bridges to a nowhere."

The candid preface gives a peek into the poet's multifaceted self that pours itself out in poetry. He says, "I have been a lot of people at times; at times, simultaneously, all or some of those; at other times struggling to be even one of those. Most of these different selves were induced by time..." The ingenious preface catches the reader's attention instantly as we are invited to delve into his poetic self and his life.

The poems were written over a span of five years, during which "the world shifted its balance, changed its rules: a starlit street reached a dead end; compromise began to win mental elections; reality wasn't singular anymore and winters turn taciturn." Chitre bypasses the overarching stress on coherence and chronology. He tells the readers: "If all poetry is a combined reaction of the conscious and the subconscious mind to the exterior, then this collection might struggle for coherence, for the sheer vastness of experiences these poems are reaction to." On the absence of any overt connection among the sections, the poet says: "coherence is not a necessity", "themes are

an illusion” and “chronological order is vapid”. Yet there remains, despite the “pronounced individuality” of the poems, a “non-thematic, indefinable and oblique link among them”. The link, Chitre says, is a “hyphen” and hence this book “hyphenated”.

The collection is divided into not so neat seven sections: Wall-less City, Cigarette-esque, The Full-hearted Days, Anger Head-banger, Cry-Lie-Why, Ding-dong-drowned and Out-of-the-socks. At the heart of all the sections is a love story. Each section deals with philosophical musings on love.

The first section opens on a promising note with the poem “In and around the School” that brings Mumbai, the “maddening city”, come alive. Chitre’s world is populated with rikshawalas, paanwalas, eunuchs, plumbers, jewellers, milkmen, BEST buses, school girls, drunkards, to name a few. It is his “magnetic connection with the mundane” where

The day  
has dismantled  
into disorder (8)

Reading these taut poems, I suddenly get the strong feeling that I recognise most of the characters that populate this urban landscape. The poet “inspects the anatomy of Bombay”, its “musical and multilingual corners”, “libraries and lawns”, “walls of daily chaos and nocturnal silences”. A real strength of the collection is the way it makes the city spring to life. We travel with the poet, who calls himself the “prisoner of the evening”, engrossed in the “memory of an ex-lover”, “suspended in the twilight”.

One of the most enjoyable poems is “Local Trains”. The daily struggles of commutation are tough to enact in poetry and not a rich picking, but Chitre manages to transfer the banal onto the poetic:

the moon-lovers and the lunatics; the liberals  
and the fanatics; the mother, the father, the kid,  
the illegitimate kid; the strong, the weak, which is  
the rich and the poor, the librarian; the bookless;  
the sombre; the reckless; the humane  
and the less humane-  
are all the same  
until they get off the train. (24)

The trains of Mumbai continue to appear throughout in some simile or metaphor.

If we were to meet again-  
At the velocity at which the first Borivali train travels (73)

As you surround me  
Crowding my mind like compartments of a local train (87)

Alliteration appears to be his favourite device: “dappling day break”, “devoted and diligent”, “The mist of the mud-ridden May”, “dodging drunkard”, “buffet of assorted blunders”, “sticky and smelly”, “stale and sallow”, are just a few examples of many more sprinkled throughout.

“I am an observer of this urban evening,” says the poet. Humming “Kishore” and jiving to Elvis over a glass of rum in a bar, the poet desires to spit her “out like a long chewing gum”. He then walks us through “the magnificent windows of Worli seaface, Infinity mall, Lokhandwala market, Marine line, Churchgate, Oval Maidan, and the University. With the inescapable urban backdrop, he navigates the lanes and bylanes of Mumbai, reminding us of Eliot’s Prufrock. With “Keema Pav, Bun Maska and cheese omelets”, “A midsummer Night’s Ice Cream”, Bombay comes alive. One cannot feign ignorance to the breath taking felicity in his understanding of the cultural milieu of Mumbai.

The second section “Cigarette-e-esque” deals more with Chitre, the lover, his memories of “Five Years Ago”, “tail of the years that went by like a cat on a highway”, “Candid messages” and “New-age memories”. This section provides a wonderful peek into the heart of a lover to whom we were introduced in the first section as a mere poet.

Section three onwards, he unwinds his deeper self, giving way to a range of emotions love is capable of, and the difficulty of coming to terms with lost love. Section four and five deal with his “private apocalypse” when “she has escaped”, “faded” in a “hopelessly dull night”. He gives in to self-loathing: “I am annoying like a spelling mistake”, “I lived a week sulking alone”, “I was a loner. . . loser. . . bastard”.

Section six is about “geography of zigzagging self-promises”, to borrow a line from one of the poems. He finds himself increasingly agitated over the state of affairs and a man out of sync with the times. He wavers between whining, cringing and existential despair. The penultimate section “Out-of-the-socks” is overwrought with clichés and melodrama.

. . . If it's love  
it will have to end this way. The lesser things  
might still sustain and drag away, but love is a flash fiction.  
It ends quickly, and often at an equivocation. Magic  
doesn't last long, nor does an orgasm. Love is no different.  
(107)

The faint shimmer of silver lining at the end of some of the poems doesn't provides much solace.

What makes this collection a delightful read is the remarkable use of juxtaposition and a unique poetic diction.

No rose blossoms in this rhyme  
star shines, no moonlight's spread,  
for this is a diatribe, my love,  
and not a fucking serenade. (72)

K Satchidanandan says, “Mihir's insistence on avoiding the cliché (no rose blossoms in this rhyme, he says) and being loyal to his personal experience have really paid off and we have a bunch of poems that are fresh, honest and full of promise.” No doubt, Chitre does not mince words. In fact, the collection may discomfit some readers with its use of the prosaic **F** words that one does not expect in a Sahitya Akademi publication. And what began as a promising start in the preface becomes predictable and tautological towards the end. The unnamed, stern, cold-hearted beloved, the persona of the scorned lover, etc., are familiar figures in love poetry. The city is anything but Eliotesque. The “Prufrock in Andheri” has nothing fresh to offer. The city of Mumbai, with which this collection began, begins to fade before disappearing altogether. The poet's subjectivity devours the city, erasing it to a simple background. The city lose itself and we are left longing for more. “All the spectacular woe” of this “exasperated city” fails to transcend the mundane.

**Dharamjeet Singh**

***Gender, Space and the Creative Imagination:  
The Poetics and Politics of Women's writing in India***

By Rekha

Primus Books

Pages 223

Rs. 1050

**Space**, as a conceptual category, has emerged as an essential, even constitutive category of experience. From philosophers, critics, geographers and scientists to artists, everyone is engaged in his or her exploration of space, of its meaning, nature, role and function in both the inner and outer spheres of human life. The increasing awareness regarding what we call 'space' compels us to rethink fundamentally the theoretical frames we have been using in comprehending and critiquing human experience, institutions, artistic creation and the self. Henri Lefebvre was one of the earliest thinkers to critically deal with the problematic of space in his classic work *The Production of Space*. Questioning the classical Kantian notion of space as a given that is envisaged as a 'container' in which things are found, Lefebvre argued that space is rather produced and constructed. In other words, space should be thought of as something that emerges as a consequence of practices (economic, political, scientific and cultural) that come together at a given point in history. It is a socio-historical production. Taking Lefebvre's lead, scholars started exploring the discourse of space in a diverse array of fields.

*Gender, Space and Creative Imagination* is a timely contribution in this ongoing exploration of the notion of space. The book is a richly detailed, lucid and engrossing exposition of the selected writings of eminent women writers - Krishna Sobti, Mahasweta Devi, Ambai, Kamla Desai and Githa Hariharan. It foregrounds the dynamic, fluid, contextual and relational nature of space and gender as lived categories within the broader patriarchal-feudal and hierarchical landscape of Indian culture. The attempt, the author states, is to develop an understanding of existing

“configurations of gendered spatiality” along “socio-geographical, embodied, mythical and literary-aesthetic” lines (189). Besides space, gender is another central term on which the critical analysis is focussed. The dominant conception of gender as a fixed category “ordained by nature” not only makes it a “flat concept” that is perceived to be imposed mechanically on women, but it also makes women the passive victims of such a unilateral imposition (10). In doing so, the female agency is subtly ignored; it, rather, remains *unthought*. Interrogating the assumptions that underpin mainstream critical discourses regarding women’s writing in India, the author has done remarkably well to illustrate, in her readings of the texts, how the female subject must be thought of as a “flesh and blood entity” with the power of agency (howsoever minimal it may be) that allows her to “negotiate her place in a given gender-order by the way she conducts herself” (10).

Whereas the first chapter, titled “Women, Space and Writing,” serves as an introduction to the argument and methodology of the book, the rest of the chapters deal with independent themes, like embodiment, sexuality, stereotyping, re-presentation and self-presentation across the hierarchical and flexible gendered contexts. In the first chapter, the author traces the limitations of mainstream academic approaches to women’s writing in India. These are simplistic, mechanical and formulaic, and generally “unfold along two diametrically opposed, even antagonist interpretive poles – feminist and phallogocentric” (5). The author scrutinizes the limitations of both of these polarities. In the process, she successfully carves out new possibilities for reading and interpreting women’s writing by adopting a methodology which is defined as “contrapuntal reading” or “reading literature by women against the grain” (7). Such reading aims to situate women’s writing in India as an independent application and articulation of women’s creative sensibility, and tries to go beyond the ghettoization of women writers. This enables the author to see contemporary women’s writing in India beyond the narrow frames provided by the mainstream reading strategies. It must be critically appreciated, she further argues, as an “ever-widening creative domain... that challeng[es] the

reductive conventions of literariness and clichéd ‘reading’ expectations” (6).

The second and third chapters focus on the themes of the ‘crossing of threshold’ and ‘embodied female sexuality’ respectively within the rigid and heavily policed gender roles. The threshold acts as a boundary to female movement, both physical and psychological. Moreover, the shifts in social roles (from being a daughter to daughter-in-law, a daughter to wife, and a wife to mother, etc.) that a woman has to undergo in the hierarchal-gendered spaces must conform to the rules prescribed by patriarchy. The ‘threshold’ becomes the most significant borderline with reference to one of the most understated questions regarding the emancipation of women in India – the question of female sexuality. Woman is never really seen as an embodied being. Always forced to disregard her sexual and bodily desires so as to become an ideal and pure woman of patriarchy, she is hardly regarded as a person with an ‘embodied sensibility’. The female body unfolds as a tangible space on which hegemonic patriarchal-feudal structures inscribe cultural norms. The protagonists of the stories and novellas discussed in these chapters become progressively conscious of the gendered character of everyday socio-cultural spaces where they have to breathe, live, speak, move and act. And some do cross the prescribed thresholds by breaking the boundaries, and are psychologically and physically injured in the process.

The next two chapters deal with the questions of myth, stereotypes, re-presentation and self-presentation. Myth has played, and continues to play, a defining function in shaping popular notions of womanhood, ideal female identity and interpersonal relationships in the Indian context. All forms of socio-cultural hierarchies, from caste, class, gender to sexuality have their strong historical justifications in these age-old Indian myths. For instance, Draupadi in Mahabharata and Sita in Ramayana are two of the most potent mythical types pertaining to the construction of female subjectivity in India. Both represent the so-called ideal woman who is generally considered to be self-sacrificing, deeply caring towards others and a thoroughly sexless creature whose sole purpose is to dedicate her life to the well-being of men (in the role of fathers, brothers,

husbands and sons). Myth, however, becomes a site for creative re-interpretation and radical intervention in the writings of Sobti, Devi, Ambai, Desai and Hariharan. Rather than rejecting the mythical wholesale, these writers have creatively appropriated the latent possibilities of alternative interpretations of the mythical with reference to their own aesthetic aims and emancipatory ideals. The question of re-presentation and stereotypes is closely related to myth. The dynamics of re-presentation and self-presentation could only be fathomed if one paid attention to the attempts made by these writers to wrest 'myth' from its fixation in the male gaze and in the patriarchal-feudal set-up. In doing so, they bring out its socio-historical and political character to the fore, thereby opening up possibilities of women's empowerment. Language and narrative structure become central to the question of re-presentation. All these writers consciously experiment with narrative texture by deploying peculiar linguistic resources suited to their protagonists. For instance, whereas "Sobti's narratives privilege the bodily idiom and acknowledge its empowering efficacy," the narratives of Ambai, in the words of the author, "verbalize sexual pleasure spiritually... [and] invest her female protagonists with sexual initiative and agency" (169).

In addition to a recapitulation of the main argument in the concluding chapter, the author situates each writer within their specific creative orientations and thematic trajectories. The artistic contribution, described as 'activist aesthetics' by the author, of the selected writers lies in the fact that the fictional landscape is destabilized by deconstructing the embedded character of gender and space at the cross-section of caste, class, nationality, tradition and modernity. The protagonists, moreover, are always portrayed as self-conscious, alive and multi-faceted personalities who are eager to acknowledge and defend their socio-cultural, existential, sexual and bodily autonomy in midst of a whole complex of conflicting forces ready to tame them into docile and obedient female subjects. As a result, a possibility of socio-cultural empowerment is articulated and shown. The book is an invaluable addition to the field of space and gender studies in India.

**Navjot Khosla**

***The Queen of Kittur: A Historical Novel***

By Basavaraj Naikar

Kanva Publications, Bangalore (2012)

Pages 383

Rs. 350

**Basavaraj Naikar's** fifth work, *The Queen of Kittur*, is an enthralling tale of a woman's courageous journey as a queen who dared to challenge the military might of one of the greatest empires of the nineteenth century, the British Empire. Naikar has earlier penned two novels and two collections of short stories.

Fifty years before the birth of Lakshmi Bai (1828-1858), the Rani of Jhansi, was born Chennamma (1778-1829), the Rani of Kittur, who valiantly fought against the strength of the British East India Company to save her kingdom from annexation. The role of Rani Lakshmi Bai in the Revolt of 1857, the First War of Indian Independence as it is popularly known, lives on in the cultural memory of the nation. The author, however, is of the view that not many authentic accounts of Rani Chennamma's heroism are available. The lack of a systematic, ordered and sequential account of her life prompted him to undertake the challenging task of chronicling Chennamma's life story. The book is written with this spirit. In fact, in the preface to the book, Naikar acknowledges:

In writing the present novel, *The Queen of Kittur*, I have drawn the raw material from the historical sources like monographs, letters, and official records of the East India Company, folk songs and even oral information. . . . Reconstructing the historical picture of the kingdom of Kittur was not an easy task for me, because the information about the historical facts and cultural details was available only in fragments, chaos and non-chronological manner. (VIII)

*The Queen of Kittur* is, thus, a historical novel based on Rani Chennamma's life and her struggles. The plot, with all its twists and turns, appears to be historically accurate. Rani Chennamma

was the second wife of Raja Mallasarja, the King of Kittur, a princely state. Born to the chief, Dhulappagowda, Desai of Kakati, she was a good horse rider, trained in the art of warfare from a young age. Her marital life was a happy one, albeit short-lived. For, Mallasarja succumbed to a mysterious illness in 1816. Subsequently, in 1818, she lost her only son in a battle at Belgaum between Bajirao Peshwa and the British, where Kittur had chosen to aid Brigadier General Munro. Furthermore, tuberculosis cut short the life of her stepson, the ruler of Kittur, in 1824. Since neither of the sons had any children, the problem of succession ensued because the British refused to accept Raja Sivalingarudrasarja's adopted son, Sivalingappa, as the new regent.

Making use of a policy of paramountcy and complete authority (that is, the Doctrine of Lapse, which was to take formal shape later, between 1848-1856 under Lord Dalhousie), both Thackeray, the ambitious political agent, as well as Chaplin, the Commissioner of the Dharwad, wished Chennamma to expel the young Sivalingappa from the throne. According to them, since the late king had no natural heir, the kingdom of Kittur had to accept British suzerainty and surrender to the Empire. But the patriotic citizens of Kittur, led by their Mother, Rani Chennamma, defied this order.

Consequently, there was an armed struggle in which, initially, the bravery of the soldiers of Kittur bore down heavily on the British soldiers. Unable to accept the casualties, the humiliation and the defeat, the British treacherously led the Rani to believe that the war would end only if she released all the hostages. Finally, the forces of Kittur were no match for the strong arm of the British despite the fact that Chennamma and her men fought with might and main. The queen was captured and imprisoned at the Bailhongal Fort, where she spent the remaining years of her life.

Chennamma's bravery and her patriotic zeal have become the stuff of legends. Her exploits have spawned litanies and ballads which are sung by bards in Karnataka even to this day. Considering the fact that the reconstruction of history, in cinematic or book form, or in any other medium, requires veracity, accuracy and attention to detail, this fictional recreation of history must have been a daunting

task for the author. Besides, he has also made use of his 'creative freedom' by adding minutiae of local culture, customs and traditions wherever required. And for this, Naikar surely deserves praise.

However, the hallmark of good writing is its ability to captivate the readers and to keep them engrossed. The acid test for a writer is when the reader is unable to put the book down. And for that, several factors come into play.

Language, or rather the poor use of language, like halitosis, can turn one off, completely. Here, the book, unfortunately, falls short of its potential as a work of historical fiction. Referring to the dead body of the late king, Raja Mallasarja, Naikar writes: "They, then, carried it to the court hall where they fixed the body in a sitting i.e. lotus posture....He [the royal priest] performed a puja to the body of the Raja by burning the incense" (71).

Inappropriate syntax also, at times, spoils the novel. Towards the end, when Rani Chennamma realizes that her kingdom is almost on the verge of being taken over by the British, she becomes fully cognizant of the consequences. She steels herself and also consoles her daughter-in-law. But Naikar writes that Chennamma: "...goaded the young Rani Viravva and was ready for any eventuality" (321). Moreover, why Naikar uses the word 'destiny' with a capital 'D' is beyond comprehension: "Rani Chennamma wondered about the strange course of her Destiny," or "'Who can avert the course of Destiny?'" (336; 338).

The expressions used are sometimes verbose and, as a result, become redundant. At other times, the use of colloquial language sticks out like a sore thumb. For instance, when accusing the traitors of Kittur, the Diwan of the kingdom says: "You are not human beings, but cobras. Though we fed you with milk, you have given us only poison" (204). Two pages later, Rani Chennamma addresses the gathering in the Royal Durbar: "[The traitors]...who, in spite of eating the salt of Kittur..." (206). Towards the end of the book, as Rani Chennamma is being led away from Kittur to Dharwad, one reads: "The womenfolk, who were all distant relatives of Rani Chennamma, felt as if the whole sky had fallen on their heads" (340).

Though Rani Chennamma is introduced early on, yet for a novel which promises to tell us her story, she is relegated to the background for the first fifty odd pages. Since Naikar employs the third person multiple point of view, one is often left wondering what is going on in her mind. It would have been better if the author had taken care of ‘characterization’ with greater subtlety. If flat characters are not meant to show any development, how does the author justify his lackluster and inadequately fleshed out round characters?

The narrative holds together but only so far as the overall storyline is concerned. A few strands, or characters, introduced in the story cry out for closure but they are never given that space. This leaves the reader curious to know what became of Thackeray’s mistress Sairabanu, or what fate awaited Prabhuswami’s disciple Madivalaswami. Why were these characters introduced in the narrative if they had little or no role to play?

*The Queen of Kittur*, despite having great potential as a story of real-life historical characters living complex lives, unfortunately ends up being dull. However, Naikar’s efforts to breathe life into a historical figure and her times are indeed commendable, notwithstanding the limitations.

## Contributors

**Ajmer Rode** has written and directed over ten plays. He has published poetry and translation in Punjabi and English. The book *Leela*, which he co-authored with Navtej Bharati, is regarded as an important milestone in Punjabi poetry.

**Amandeep** is a research fellow in the Department of English and Cultural Studies, Panjab University.

**Anne Murphy** teaches in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of British Columbia. Her work has appeared in *History and Theory*, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, *South Asian History and Culture*, *the Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, and other journals.

**Ben Antao** is a Canadian-Goan novelist, poet and journalist. His books include *Images of the USA and Goa – A Rediscovery*.

**Cyril Dabydeen** was born in Guyana. He arrived in Canada in 1970. In 2007 he won the Guyana Prize for Fiction. A regular book critic for *World Literature Today*, he currently teaches in the University of Ottawa. His poems have been anthologized in the Oxford, Penguin and the *Heinemann Book of Caribbean Verse*. His latest book is *God's Spider* (Peepal Tree Press, UK).

**Dharamjeet Singh** is Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Punjabi University.

**Gurdial Singh** (1933-2016), a famous Punjabi novelist and short story writer, received Jnanpith Award in 1999. He was honored with Padma Shri in 1998.

**Guy Sinsler**, after 10 years in the Army, began a peripatetic career in publishing educational materials, international product marketing and freelance writing for newspapers and magazines. His work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies in USA, Canada, Japan, England, Australia, Romania and India. He has been awarded Diane Brebner Poetry Prize, Carleton University Poetry Prize, AHA Books Tanka Sequence Prize (USA), KejiAsoSenryu Prize (USA);

South Asian Ensemble (Winter 2016 -- Fall 2016) 189

Hekinan Haiku Special Prize (Japan); and the IODE Ontario Short Story, CBC Ottawa Radio Documentary, and Alberta Culture Radio Drama Prizes.

**Harjeet Singh Gill**, a world-renowned anthropological linguist and semiologist, is Professor Emeritus, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

**Harpreet Sekha** is a Punjabi short story writer based in BC, Canada. He has published three books of short stories.

**John Brandi** is a poet and painter. He is one of living finest writers of haiku. He has also been in the forefront in the struggle for land rights and civil liberties for the Andean farmers, a protestor against the American war in Vietnam and the founder of Tooth of Time Books which published the first books of aspiring poets. A recipient of National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship, he is currently teaching creative writing in New Mexico (USA).

**Kavita Jindal** was born in India and lived in Hong Kong for several years. She currently lives in London. Her poetry collection *Raincheck Renewed* was published by Chameleon Press in 2004 to critical acclaim. A selection of her work can be read on [www.kavitajindal.com](http://www.kavitajindal.com).

**Kedarnath Singh** is an eminent poet, critic and essayist in Hindi. He was honoured with Jnanpith Award in 2013 and Sahitya Akademy Award in 1989.

**M. L. Raina**, a former professor of English at Punjab University, is an eminent critic, teacher and literary and film reviewer.

**Nabina Das** is a poet and writer currently based in Hyderabad. She has two poetry collections, *Into the Migrant City* and *Blue Vessel* in addition to two books of fiction, *The House of Twining Roses: Stories of the Mapped* and *The Unmapped; Footprints in the Bajra*. She teaches creative writing.

**Nalini Warriar** is from Kerala, India but now lives in Quebec, Canada, where she is working in the fields of endocrinology and molecular biology. She is the author of *Blues from Malabar Coast*

(short stories) and *The Enemy Within* (a novel). She has also lived in Heidelberg, Germany and Strasbourg, France.

**Navjot Khosla** is Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Punjabi University.

**Navtej Bharati** writes poetry and prose in Punjabi and English. He was awarded the Best Overseas Author Award by the Punjab Languages Department in 2004. He lives in London, ON, Canada.

**Nirupama Dutt** is a well-known journalist, poet and translator. *Stories of the Soil*, *Half the Skies* and *Ik Nadi Sanwli Si*, *Children of the Night* and *Lal Singh Dil: Poet of the Revolution* are some of her books. She has translated Gulzar's poetry and is currently working on a novel.

**Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan** (1948-1997) was a Pakistani musician, primarily a famous singer of Qawwalis.

**Parminder Sodhi** is a Punjabi poet with many of poetry books, including *Jheel Wang Ruko* and *Shanjhe Sah Laindian*. He lives in Japan.

**Priscila Uppal**, a well-known Canadian poet, playwright and writer of fiction, is Professor with York University. Her work has been translated into Croatian, Dutch, French, Greek, Italian, Korean and Latvian. *Six Essential Questions*, her play, had its world premiere as part of the Factory Theatre 2013-2014 season. Her memoir, *Projection: Encounters with My Runaway Mother*, has been recently published by Thomas Allen Publishers.

**Rosy Singh** teaches and researches German literature, Semiotics and comparative studies in the Jawahar Lal University, New Delhi.

**Sapna Dogra** teaches in PGDAV College (Evening), University of Delhi. Her research interests include folklore studies, translation studies, indian english writing, hindi literature and popular literature.

**Sakoon N Singh** teaches English Literature in DAV College Chandigarh, India. She has been a recipient of the UGC-JRF Fellowship and the Fulbright Grant.

**Sandy Gill** whose paintings adorn the cover of this issue of South Asian Ensemble, is an upcoming artist based in Brampton, Ont. Canada. She also writes poems in Punjabi.

**Sartaj**, a wildlife biologist, divides his time, as he says, “between gallivanting in the mountains and masquerading as an artist.”

**Shane Joseph**, a graduate of the Humber School for Writers in Toronto, Canada has published *Redemption in Paradise*, his first novel, and a short story collection *Fringe Dwellers*. He won the Canadian Christian Writers award for the Best Futuristic/Fantasy novel in 2010. His latest book is *In the Shadow of the Conquistador*, a novel set in Peru and Canada.

**Usha Kishore** is a British poet and a translator from Sanskrit. She is a winner of the Arts Council Award and the Culture Vanning Award. Her books are *On Manannan's Isle* (2014) and *Night Sky between the Stars* (2015). A book of her translations from Sanskrit, *Translating the Divine Woman*, was published in 2015 by *Rasala India*.

**Zubair Ahmad** has published two collections of Punjabi short stories. He ran Kitab Trinjan, a Punjabi literature publishing house for over a decade. He teaches English in Islamiyah College, Lahore and was awarded Dhahan Prize for Punjabi literature for fiction. His family was displaced from Batala in Indian Punjab.