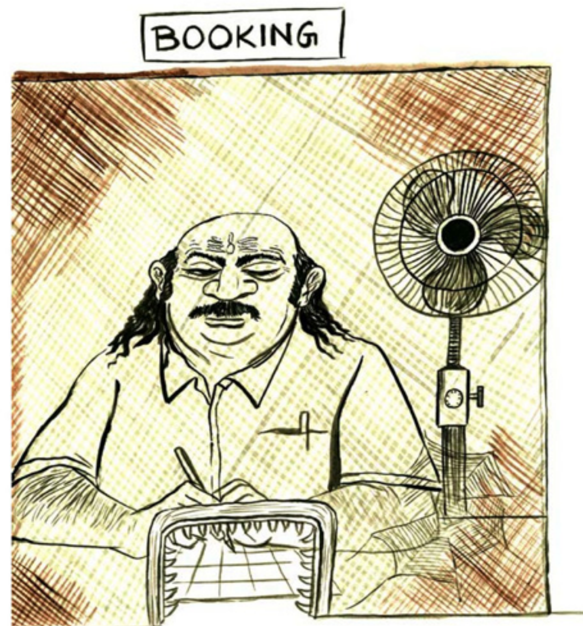
Five Dials



NUMBER 17

In Jaipur

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. . . plus Roma Tearne, Leila Aboulela, Manju Kapur, Mahatma Gandhi and indeed many more.

CONTRIBUTORS

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This issue of *Five Dials* was guest-edited by MERU GOKHALE and SIMON PROSSER in Delhi and London.

Designed by DEAN ALLEN.

Thanks to JULIETTE MITCHELL, ANNA KELLY, JOSEPHINE GREYWOODE, HEMALI SODHI, VARUN CHAUDHARY, RAHUL DIXIT, SANJOY ROY, WILLIAM DALRYMPLE, SHEULI SETHI, NAMITA GOKHALE and BENA SAREEN.

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On Resolutions For 2011

We're not so good at keeping our new year's resolutions, which is why we're just getting around to them in late January. We made resolutions on the eve of December 31st but all the rash, unachievable promises have already burnt away, like the flaming Kirschwasser poured atop a serving of Cherries Jubilee. (Look up the recipe.) We are now left with the real resolutions; the kind that settle into your bones during the depths of January and February, at the lowest point of the year, when, in the words of poet David Berman, 'it's been evening all day long'.

In 2011 we've decided to list our *Five Dials* resolutions collectively, taking in contributions from the entire editorial staff. We're going to keep them anonymous, meaning that at the end of the list you'll probably think of *Five Dials* as a single, contradictory, very troubled, but ambitiously hopeful person – which may be a fairly accurate description after all.

As for this issue, we hope it speaks for itself. We're launching it live at India's Jaipur Literary Festival and with the help of Meru Gokhale we've stocked it with writing, drawing and photography from quite a few people appearing at the festival (plus Mahatma Gandhi, naturally).

You may also find us chasing some of our other favourite writers around Jaipur's Amber Fort, Jantar Mahal and Museum of Hand Printing in the hope of persuading them to contribute in future. Chimamanda Adichie, Kiran Desai, Vikram Seth, Jay McInerney, Richard Ford, and Junot Diaz – we are thinking of you!

But now onwards to 2011, and all we plan to improve.

This year *Five Dials* will learn Spanish; relearn Spanish; learn to love again with this wounded heart; learn how to be decisive while driving through roundabouts; learn proper sailing knots; learn more about Takashi Murakami; learn to appreciate Will Ferrell films; read more Javier Marías; only sleep with women from now on; use dental floss; dance like Shakira 'till the moon becomes the sun'; buy the house next door; have a child; think of a great name for that child; buy a fountain pen; buy some Royal Blue ink for that fountain pen; start a radio station; start listening to my mother; stop listening to my mother; practice creative visualization (and perhaps yogic flying); go kayaking; attend more films at the BFI; learn all the countries and capitals in Europe; stop fighting with my sister; stop fighting with my parents; stop using L8TER in texts; stop making that face when my brother makes a suggestion; stop using my smartphone when I should be using a map; eat more kale; eat less food from restaurants; go to more restaurants; go to that restaurant where they do that 'duck thing'; eat Cherries Jubilee at least once; read Proust; read Beckett; read Marian Keyes (as research for my chicklit novel); write the chicklit novel; go to Cornwall; stop wearing those jeans; mend that pocket; read a book about military history, like maybe *Stalingrad*, though even the thought of doing that makes me a little tired; use moisturizer; eat corn; stop eating fish; be nice but not too nice – i.e. a pushover. Get new shoelaces. And learn to sew on buttons.

Looks like it's going to be a good year.

—CRAIG TAYLOR & SIMON PROSSER

BUT FIRST . . .

Returning to Karachi

by Kamila Shamsie

I'M SITTING OUTDOORS, eating a plate of chips, when something thwacks me in the face. I look around for a football or a polythene bag, or a football wrapped in layers of polythene. But even as I see nothing projectile-like I know exactly what has hit me; I'm in Karachi, after all, and some part of me has been anticipating an attack by this thing all my life.

I look at my friend, Nada, who is sitting opposite me.

'An eagle,' she confirms. And then, thrillingly – because who wants it to end there? – she adds, 'It'll be back.'

'It will?'

'Definitely. I've been hearing a lot about this kind of thing happening lately.'

Returning to Karachi always means catching up with the newest terror (which is always quite separate to the unchanging superstitions that pass from generation to generation – my favourite of these is the one which warns that pregnant women must stay indoors with the blinds closed during a lunar eclipse or else they might turn scissors on to themselves). Last time I was here, two months ago, the seasonal terror was mosquitoes. Specifically, the kind that carry Dengue fever. No one ventured out just after sunset, which is apparently 'the biting time'. Yes, really – Twilight: the Biting Time. Often the terrors reflect some entirely explicable neurosis, such as the often recurring one (which can never be traced to even a single case) of 'uncovered' women in upscale parts of town having acid flung in their faces or their bare arms slashed with a knife; or, in more recent years, the one about the man who asks for a lift and then identifies himself as a suicide bomber on his final mission – he demands to be driven all around town, threatening to detonate his explosives at any moment, only to get out of the car hours later and walk away. Other times the terror is slightly more oblique, such as 'catching AIDS through watching *Titanic*'. In the late nineties a rumour went around that 'miscreants' (a wonderful catch-all word which has the popularity it rightly deserves in Pakistan) were injecting syringes filled with the AIDS virus into cinemagoers watching James Cameron's epic film. To this list of fears I can now add 'Eagles who attack – and return!'

We identify the plate of chips as the bird's real target, and I cover it with a paper napkin that turns red in places from the ketchup on the plate and translucent where there's chip grease. In order to eat a chip I have to lift the napkin and whisk the food out from beneath it. I am sitting in Karachi, by a swimming pool, sneaking chips from beneath a veil. I feel as if I'm performing a piece of art that thinks itself witty and subversive, but isn't.

The eagle isn't really an eagle. It's a kite. But everyone always calls them eagles, and everyone tells tales of the damage they can inflict. Throughout my childhood they were the scourge of the playground, though they almost never attacked anyone. They didn't need to; when they gathered in a particular spot, we'd all move away, ceding our territory in recognition of their ancient right to it. Terror, back then, was beaks and talons in a schoolyard. In the years since, the world has turned dark with the threat of AIDS-filled syringes and suicide bombers and acid attacks.

The longer I think of the bird, the more my imagination softens the impact to my face. Now, hours after we collided, I feel just the ghost of gentle feathers brushing my cheek. ◊

Beat It

A retiree sings Michael Jackson, or something close. By Patrick French

Dr K. Chaudhry, a seventy-six-year-old retired medical practitioner, became a global internet sensation by singing 1,400 cover versions of famous songs and posting them on YouTube. With a backdrop of a dingy curtain and a strip light, he could be seen performing 'Hotel California' and 'Dil Deke Dekho', sometimes accompanied by his grandchildren sitting on his lap. His most popular song was 'Beat It', which went viral with an alternative title given by a viewer: 'The Real Killer of Michael Jackson – (he was surfing the internet late at night and this song killed him)'.

Before his breakthrough, Dr K had been rejected for a reality show featuring 'bathroom singers'. Now, he appeared via a webcam link on TV channels around the world. A Dr K fan club was growing in the United States. At its inaugural dinner, he appeared live on screen and told his fans: 'That cannot be described just as a sentimental relationship between a man in Delhi and some hundreds in America. That is a carry-forward relationship from some past lives.' In his lack of pretension, in his dedication, in his industry and in his refusal to be fazed, Dr K was an Indian type.

'I am never satisfied with the status quo,' he told me, sitting in the living room of his house on the outskirts of Delhi. He had an old Dell computer, with a separate speaker topped by a webcam. 'I get the lyrics on the screen, put the speaker between myself and the lyrics and start to sing.' He showed me how. 'I can record twelve songs a day. I've translated Mike Jackson into Hindi. Until I had a legal problem, "Beat It" was getting 3,000 hits a day in Hindi and English on YouTube. After I went on G4 TV, I had 400 comments and fifty phone calls in a single day. That was the busiest day of my life. I had to do so many interviews. Most of my fans are in Canada and Pakistan. I have a dozen clubs in America. At first I called myself Dr Krishen Chaudhry, then I was told my name was too long for marketing, so I am "Dr K". I have a fan club in Singapore. They are all airline pilots, and most are Indian.' As well as singing, he had created astrology software and written medical textbooks. 'I also have an internet mall, selling many things, which makes me US $300–400 a month.'

'Do you want hot or cold?' asked his son Kapil, who had joined us in the living room. I opted for cold. He turned on an overhead fan. Since Dr K's retirement from medical practice, another of his sidelines – the selling of diagnostic equipment – had been taken over by Kapil. 'He revolutionized blood-testing techniques,' said the son, taking a ballpoint pen from his shirt's top pocket while inspecting his mobile phone. 'We manufactured one calorimeter using Fotodiox – a new kind of sensor – rather than a photovoltaic cell, which converts light to distilled voltage. It was done for the first time by us, here in India. We have had more than 10,000 installations. That's why I'm surprised to see his diversification from that line to this.' He indicated his father and the webcam. 'He has had success abroad with his singing, but neighbours don't praise him.'

'When I was eleven,' said Dr K, 'I wrote a lyric and sang it in the temple. I've always liked to sing, but I was told my singing was bad. Neighbours don't praise me.'

'It's a little bit like our diagnostic products,' said Kapil grimly. 'They can be easier to sell in the southern cities like Bangalore than in Delhi.'

Was Dr K upset by the negative comments that were posted on his web videos? 'I say this: praises please me and abuses amuse me. Without taking criticism, you can't improve. They spend some time with my songs. Using rude language is their culture.'

'Vulgar language is worldwide,' said Kapil.

Their house was in a residential suburb of Punjabi Bagh, an area allocated to migrants from Pakistan after partition. Over time it had become prosperous, as the refugees did well. Dr K had been expelled from Pakistan when he was three years old. 'Since childhood, I have been working seventeen to twenty-one hours a day. My father died of diarrhoea in the camp. He had four wives, because he had property and needed an heir. We were given a little land, and I had to walk to school, with no guardian.'

He gestured out at the street, indicating the neighbourhood. 'These Punjabis, they worked very hard after partition.' Dr K has no fear of failure. On one of his websites, he has written: 'I am known across the globe for multiple diverse activities. If one becomes a total flop, I have others to boast of.'

My meeting with Dr K had an unexpected sequel. Usually when a writer meets a subject, the writer retains control, spinning his or her own version of the encounter and choosing the way it is remembered. In this case, a few days after I met Dr K, I read an interview with him in the *Times of India*. He was quoted as saying that I was writing his biography. Was I? Should I disagree, accept – or just Beat It? When a journalist called me to check, I said I could not confirm or deny Dr K's remarks.

Adapted from India: A Portrait

Trouble at Sheikh Villa

Faiza Sultan Khan on the self-styled dandy of Karachi

SHEIKH VILLA is a lean townhouse in the middle of Karachi's Zamzama, a centrally located grid of streets boasting designer boutiques, rows of shoe shops, expensive restaurants and swanky cafes, with an arms and ammunition outlet calmly occupying a vast storefront between them. In its day, which ran from the early noughties up until the owner's execution in August 2008, Sheikh Villa was one of the city's best known residences for people who loosely fell into the parameters of Karachi 'Society' (the 'High' goes unspoken, and for good reason).

Night after night, the great and the good – by which I mean the affluent, the vaguely glamorous and their hangers-on – could be found here drinking cocktails, exchanging *bons mots* and lustful glances and doing the odd line of blow off the sleek black counter of the bar. The country's codes of enforced modesty and conspicuous piety do not apply to this happy breed, a fact that everyone has cottoned on to, barring a few sloppy foreign correspondents.

Pakistan's people's parties have always comprised the usual suspects: landowners, politicians, scions of industry, high-ranking bureaucrats, generals, colonels and a sprinkling of professionals, largely hailing from the families of landowners, politicians and so forth. It's a clique within a clique – high school with real power and some serious lunch money. A running joke is that in Pakistan directions are never given on the basis of road names and house numbers: one is asked if one knows X's house, then told to take a left from that till one gets to Y's house, and it's next door. If you don't know the people whose homes form these landmarks, you literally can't get anywhere.

The thirty-something host at Sheikh Villa bucked this trend. He appeared to buck all trends. Sheikh Amer Hassan was a dandy; a fey, self-styled eccentric with a penchant for hats, often found withstanding the sticky heat of this seaside city in a three-piece suit and a cravat, pipe in hand. Or an extravagantly embroidered *sherwani* or perhaps a denim shirt set off by a wide diamante necklace. His shoulder-length hair was most often seen pulled back in a Transylvanian-via-Hammer-horror style. He stood tall, holding himself in the manner of a man for ever in the thrall of the photographer's viewfinder.

Hassan came from a professional background of lawyers and doctors, a family that qualified as successful but not prominent. This did not stop him from bestowing a medieval coat of arms upon his titular residence, a crown atop a golden shield held up at both sides by unicorns. This crest made appearances on his crockery, cushion covers and hand towels. In lieu of a motto, it read, 'Sheikh Villa, ESTD 2002'.

The juxtaposition of the coat of arms and the date seems an irreverent masterstroke, the work of one who is thumbing his nose at the closed ranks of the old ways. But it was not a send-up, unfortunately. At least, no more so than the characteristics of Hassan himself and his boudoir of a home. One was able to ascertain on briefest acquaintance with the man that the coat of arms was sincerely aspirational. Hassan flattered his guests, honing in on their area of interest, from parties to poetry, and being all things to all men. In his home he played courtier, not the one holding court. The walls were covered with framed photographs and documents, including contributions from a few A-listers, the apex being a letter from the late Diana, Princess of Wales, the tail-end some rather dubious Pakistani models and hairstylists, with some of Boney M's original line-up featuring somewhere in between. Hassan was to the Pakistani social pages what tourists are to the Eiffel Tower: ever present. He dominated the weekend supplements of the mid-noughties: Hassan having friends over for a *soirée intime*, Hassan throwing a casual get-together, Hassan celebrating birthdays; his own, his friends' and, in one inspired spread, his cat's.

His official website stating his achievements (and then some) proclaims that Sheikh Amer Hassan, following his graduation from the Bournville College of Arts, became 'an established name in the British fashion industry'. There is no evidence of this. Even within Pakistan, a place where girls who are photographed on billboards in more than two urban centres can airily lay claim to the term 'supermodel', and where arranging a fashion show earns one the title of 'fashion choreographer', Hassan's credentials are met with great scepticism. He was appointed fashion designer for an independent local television channel for a stint, he had been interviewed as a Pakistani fashion designer by the BBC, but the general consensus was that he had blagged his way into these gigs. A few months before his passing, he excitedly publicized his fashion show in Banja Luka, the second largest city in Bosnia-Herzegovina i.e. absolutely nowhere, even by Pakistani standards. Following his death, several popular designers went on record to say that the few fashion shows he held featured the work of design students and that his portfolio consisted of clothes borrowed from other designers.

While to the dispassionate observer Pakistan may not seem the obvious choice to follow Paris, London, New York and Milan when sizing up global fashion capitals, people locally seem to have a different impression. The culture pages, at a respectful distance from the pages that list the bombs and the death tolls, are filled with fashion people – models, designers and the aforementioned fashion choreographers. This may appear to be paradoxical to expectations of the Taliban heartland, but in fact both stem from the same root cause – religion, or, rather, the country's application of it, along with the determination to craft a decidedly Pakistani identity, detached from its own history. Deemed un-Islamic, or that other no-no, Indian, art forms that once thrived in this region have become extinct. The film industry is, for all intents and purposes, defunct, dance has been all but wiped out, theatrical productions and music concerts are few and far between, art shows are small and hold limited appeal. This gaping cultural vacuum has come to be occupied by God for some people and by conspicuous consumption for others. For the wealthy, there is little to do but wear their status

on their sleeve, to buy expensive clothes and to be seen by other people who buy them. While concerts and festivals have been increasingly driven underground by the constant threat of terrorism, fashion remains something which the elite have clung to with great tenacity, showing the priorities shaped by two to three decades of cultural malnutrition.

Following the devastating earthquake of 2005, no one batted an eyelid when funds were raised through a concert and fashion show, intended to celebrate Pakistani culture, at the Royal Albert Hall in London. Spending is officially an art form, if not the primary art form. In the last few years, the fashion industry in Pakistan has not just retained its clientele but expanded, with national 'fashion weeks' becoming the latest trend. And while fashion has grown fat as the arts have grown lean, Musharraf's media boom and comparatively liberal tenure made it all the more visible in the public eye. His term ended in tears, with the Taliban at the gates of the capital, the judiciary suspended, independent television channels forced off the air and Pakistan briefly joining that notorious fraternity of countries that bans the BBC. But before the General lost the plot there was the golden age. Well, 'golden' might be overstating it a tad. Since Musharraf's drive for Enlightened Moderation tended to hover at the surface of things, the gilded age might be closer to the truth. Along with paving the way for independent broadcasting, taking the country from just two television channels to over a hundred, his unfulfilled desire for Pakistan to adopt a more relaxed religiosity and his modest economic boom allowed a new class to enter the public eye.

Fifteen years ago, if you weren't part of the *soigné* set, a night out would comprise a drive to the marketplace to browse shoe shops and bookstores and perhaps take in a meal and an ice-cream. Whatever happened at private parties stayed within the confines of those homes. Since that time, the social pages have multiplied. There are television channels that exclusively cover red carpet events and, imitating what they see on cable television from the West, absolutely everything, from the opening of a fast food restaurant to a book launch now comes with a red carpet. It is something of a triumph of style over substance; imitative modernity executed so shabbily, it's almost touching. This is a home-grown celebrity culture that goes beyond the traditional domain of sports and politics. Those beautiful (or at least those affluent-looking) young people you see, with their easy air of entitlement and their comparatively glittering lifestyle, they are having fun in this very country! And so everyone wants a piece of it.

The noughties have seen 'fun' become the hot new commodity. In a country where the law calls for prohibition, resulting in a lack of public spaces such as bars, pubs and nightclubs, event management has become another boom industry. Whereas ten years ago New Year's Eve for the elite was restricted to charity balls at exclusive establishments, now that the media boomers and other professionals have a disposable income too there are ticketed parties being organized by the dozen, with private bars, imported flowers and fig and brie *hors d'oeuvres*. 'Party planner' is now a profession, and one that mints money. Just as crucially the old guard, while still exclusively marrying one another, is mingling with people their parents didn't go to school with, whose family trees they are not familiar with. It is all still private and a world away from the Pakistan of the street, where you can be arrested for blasphemy on a whim, but it is a world that has recently allowed a certain element of social mobility.

An association with fashion, as Sheikh Amer Hassan deduced, was the easiest entrée to this. He became, in lieu of clothing from his alleged fashion house, his own greatest creation, with his outlandish dress sense, his stylized manner and his over-exposed lifestyle. Famous for being an exhaustively familiar face in the people's pages, in the fawning social columns that sang the praises of his parties and his celebrity guests, and briefly as the host of a fashion-related talk show, Hassan all but out-Warholed Warhol and became the patron saint of nothing. While he was sneered at behind his back, and sometimes to his face, this did not stop the pretty people from flocking to his home. Anything for a good time in a country where the only way to entertain yourself is to drink, wear or snort your money.

However, Hassan was dogged by uglier rumours than mere tales of his ridiculous extravagances. Anecdotal evidence from his extended social circle suggested that he had a penchant for young boys. The grapevine went so far as to whisper that part of his income, supplementing his television stipend, came from supplying young boys to interested parties. Despite the talk, and there was plenty of it, nothing was done. A columnist quipped at a party that this was the country where serial killer Javed Iqbal had to hand himself over to the police after they failed to notice that he had killed an alleged hundred children. Some started turning down Hassan's invitations, but not enough for the good times to die down at the Villa.

When Karachi awoke on 30 August 2008 to find that Hassan's body had been discovered at his home, bound, gagged and shot twice in the face and once in the head, people were shocked but not necessarily surprised. Two brothers, nineteen-year-old Saad Farooq and twenty-three-year old Ameer Hamza, students from a town in the Punjab, were arrested for his

murder. Statements in the papers varied, but the boys' confession claimed that Hassan had tried to rape the younger brother. A leading broadsheet stated that Hassan bartered sexual favours on the promise of making the boy a model. The Sheikh Villa regulars went mysteriously quiet and were at pains to distance themselves from their former friend. Hassan's was an ill-attended funeral, in sharp contrast to an average night at his swinging pad.

The boys were arrested with what seemed like overwhelming evidence: bloodstained clothing, records of phone calls to and from Hassan in the early hours of the morning just prior to his murder and, if that wasn't enough, a smoking gun. The evidence was deemed insubstantial, however, and in 2010 they were both acquitted, without a fuss, with barely a mention in the papers or in social circles. In a country steeped in the politics of revenge, there is a comfortable consensus that Hassan 'had it coming'. A member of the bureaucratic elite, who doesn't wish to be named but was a regular at Hassan's gatherings, says that he believes the boys come from a feudal Punjabi family and that there was no way his clan was going to allow their children to be charged over 'the death of a nobody' like Hassan.

If Hassan is representative of the beginnings of a New Pakistan, placed on its path by the media boom and the Musharraf years, it appears Old Pakistan will triumph over it every time. Sheikh Amer Hassan's website, which is still up and running, seems simultaneously deluded and prescient in its sign-off to the page celebrating his home – 'O' I so very truly love life in this post-partition sub-continent now called Pakistan where life can be so exciting . . . and everything so possible. Pakistan is the place, the ultimate "land of opportunity". Thank you every one for being a part of my fantasy called Sheikh Villa.' ◊

MEMOIR

The House of Fairies

by Namita Devidayal

I WAS BORN in Woodlands Hospital in Kolkata, in a sanitized room, surrounded by masked doctors. But one generation earlier and it could have been a dark room in the 'house of fairies' in Amritsar, supervised by a great-aunt, whose *chhole* everyone remembers but not her name.

That was where my father was born, before partition, in a narrow lane still called Karmon Deori, where the houses kissed each other across the street, where women didn't use phones but shouted from trellised windows, '*Shkuntala nu munda hoya-e*!' and, within hours, the entire community would get news of the birth of a little boy.

My father was the first son in a family of eight children. (He jokes that every time he came home from boarding school, there was someone new for him to meet.) His siblings were all born in Bombay, where the enterprising family moved after his birth to run mills.

Every year, the family grew more prosperous and the ties to Amritsar grew more tenuous until they became as threadbare as a worn shawl of little use in an age of comforters, but which you still take out to get a whiff of old remembrances. My father's memories of the 'house of fairies', which got its name because of the two alabaster angels that looked over the walled city, halt at the age of kite-flying from the terrace. He remembers the smelly boxes which had to be carried down and emptied by a cleaning woman called Kailash because there were no drains, and the two buffalo on the ground floor, and the aunt who turned their milk into delectables using pure ghee.

My father went to English boarding schools and became a cosmopolitan Bombay-wallah who respected diversity and change. He still spoke in Punjabi with his mother, and went occasionally to the Punjabi market in Wadala to pick up *vadiyan*, but by the time we came along the mother tongue in Bombay was English and so we were raised to be good global citizens with a healthy disregard for parochial leanings – and for *desi ghee*.

But it is not so simple to leave worlds behind. My son recently asked whether he was Punjabi or Sindhi, and I said both, but then realized that he didn't have access to either world. My husband's family had long since left Larkana and my family was equally distant from Amritsar. His grandparents spoke to him in English and his classmates needed tuition in Hindi; he was turning into an even more accomplished global citizen than his parents.

I asked that my father take us back to Karmon Deori, to the city of the Golden Temple. The house of fairies was still there, with its gorgeous blue stained-glass windows, but the buffalo room had been turned into a linen showroom. As we were leaving, a young girl came running out and said, 'You're from Bombay. Have you met Shahrukh Khan?' I laughed at her naiveté, then looked at her and baulked. She had our grandmother's eyes and smile.

You can't run away from history, from connectivity. It was a simple twist of fate that her branch of the family stayed behind and ours moved to Bombay. The truth is, I could have been that girl who ran down Karmon Deori.

A version of this article appeared in The Times of India.

Paradise Feathers And Chicken Legs

by Roma Tearne

S.S. RANASINGHA was feeling rather pleased with himself. He was a painter born on a magical, tempestuous, paradise island floating in the Indian Ocean. (No prizes for guessing the name of the place. This is a story, not a competition.) S.S. was a man of some distinction. Once, long ago, as a result of a brilliant watercolour showing a bird with paradise feathers strutting on a veranda while a servant man exposed himself, S.S. had won a scholarship to go to art school in Britain. The painting he had made was banned on the island but S.S. didn't care. It had served its purpose and bought him a ticket to England, and while the place where he was to study painting wasn't all that wonderful (they took in loads of foreign students because foreign governments paid a lot of money for the privilege), as far as S.S. was concerned a trip to England had subsidiary bonuses. For instance, he could always say, with absolute truth, that he was 'UK-returned'. Do you *know* how much that little label impresses people on the teardrop island? In terms of boasting, 'UK-returned' is as good as saying 'I'm a billionaire'.

After finishing his degree S.S. returned home briefly, to tell his parents his news. Even before the ink on his certificate had dried, he had been offered several jobs. It was the late 1970s. 'War is the Answer' slogans were everywhere. The paradise island was looking a little lacklustre and bullet-marked. Rich men's wives went to the Far East to buy their sari silk, export was flagging because the West was making a fuss about something called slave labour and petrol prices had gone up. S.S. took the best of the jobs offered and told his surprised mother that she need not bother having his horoscope drawn up because he had already found a girl. She was a white girl. His mother groaned, his father threw up his hands in despair and his sister asked, 'Is she fair?'

'Dumb question, eh?' S.S. said to his girlfriend over the phone that night. 'Of course you're *fair*! You're bloody English!'

The girlfriend – she was called Sue – smirked. She had mousy hair which, when helped by a bottle, passed as blonde. From her point of view she had done rather well in netting a swarthy prince. One moment she had been polishing glasses in a pub and the next, *abracadabra*, out popped S.S. like a genie from a bottle. Amazing!

'Funny name, though,' sniffed her dad when she told him. 'It's got certain unpleasant associations.'

Sue took no notice. Her dad had fought in the war and was a little oversensitive.

All went according to plan; well, there *was* no real plan, to tell you the truth. Sue getting pregnant was a mistake, but no one cared . . . much. The baby girl was born two months after the wedding and S.S. and Sue and Sallybaby Ranasingha, as she was christened, arrived as a roped-together package on the island. They took up temporary residence in the walled, barbed-wired, closed-circuit-televisioned family house in the middle of the city, at an address that had the number seven attached to it. That's a clue, by the way, for those of you who know this honeymoon paradise. They arrived four days, seventeen hours and three minutes before some damnfool bastards blew up a fleet of aeroplanes at the airport, giving the country a bad name and costing the Government millions.

'Phew!' said S.S. 'Lucky escape.'

'Yes, yes,' agreed his mother, waggling her head. 'Good karma, Putha!'

And she promptly put a knife under her bed and went to the temple. Just to be on the safe side.

But the servant woman (it had been her brother that S.S. had painted in the winning picture, making him out to be a flasher when he was most certainly not . . . often) hated S.S. One could hardly blame her. S.S. had everything and all the servant woman had was her closely guarded hatred. So she set about making a charm. That's what they call the evil-smelling spells they do on this island.

The charm went like this: 'Make them suffer, make them suffer. I need them to *suffer*!'

The servant woman was of a different ethnic group to the Ranasinghas. She looked no different from them but, as everyone knows, looks can be deceptive. The woman bore her grudge like a blue gemstone embedded in her left buttock, which made her walk in a funny way, but she continued with her plan, taught to her at the charm school. Three weeks passed while she tied the legs of a couple of frogs together – with some difficulty – and uttered curses. The air had become blue, either with the woman's bad language or perhaps from the smoke from detonated suicide bombs. It was difficult to tell; all was confusion. In the Government there were those who thought that throwing money at the war would not bring peace and that instead money should be spent on education and not charm schools or envy parlours. There were others who simply wanted to kill all journalists, aid workers and the ex-British Governor, who happened to be holidaying on the island at the time.

'Let's pretend,' said one of the Government officials, hitching up her sari.

'There isn't any war,' said another. 'Just helicopters dropping a few leaflets warning people about the terrorists.'

'Keep the bloody foreigners out,' said a third. 'Unless they want to have a bonking holiday on the beach and spend lots of sterling.'

'They're all mad here,' Sue said, listening to the endless debates going on in two languages, one of them obscure. She wasn't following any of it very well, what with the heat and her mother-in-law wanting her to wake the baby at auspicious intervals and feed it! Sue wanted to go back to Basingstoke, never mind the dire weather there. S.S. was inclined to agree. This was no place to bring up a baby girl. In the trees, brightly coloured birds, looking like a scattering of sweets, pecked the mangos, while giant spiders abseiled from rattan roof to rattan roof. Two orange-spotted deadly snakes rubbed shoulders in the dust and a dog barked at a crow. It appeared that the servant woman was about to have some mild success. The elder Mr Ranasingha, all white shirt and sovereign-gold cuff links, with *eau de cologne* sprinkled on his starched handkerchief, clapped eyes on her for the

first time in all the years of her employment and had sex with her. Ha! thought the servant woman who had not expected quite such a hit. Still concentrating on S.S., wanting to get rid of him, she tied two chickens' legs together.

It worked. A few weeks later S.S. and Sue scooped up Sallybaby and went back to Basingstoke, where they hoped to live happily in the rain, the wind and the cold. Had they done so, of course, this would have been the end of the story. But the chicken legs, tied together in the shape of the letter J and buried deep under a banana tree, were spewing bad thoughts all over the garden. They were poisoning the soil and rotting the tree roots – those that weren't already rotted, that is. After a bit they infiltrated the water system, the drains and the foundations of the house with the address that had the number seven in it. Poison crept everywhere. Mr Ranasingha, noticing something was afoot, wondered vaguely what it was.

'I say,' he told his wife, avoiding her eye because of his guilt, 'the gardener has made a jolly fine job of the flower beds, no? Have you noticed how many flowers there are of late?'

Mrs Ranasingha knew what her husband was up to but it suited her to feign ignorance on such matters.

'Yes,' she said and ordered the servant woman to pick some of the flowers for the shrine outside.

But the spread of the poison didn't end at the Ranasingha house. Who would have thought there was so much poison in two small chicken legs? Having worked its way as far as it could, it moved into next-door's garden. Out it went through the concrete compound where the dogs were chained. The dogs whined as the poison wormed its way under the soil, up the drain and through the telephone cable, dodging the centipedes and the scorpions. Working its way quickly it spread, faster than an epidemic of dengue fever, multiplying and dividing, metamorphosing and laughing its way across this capital city. When it had infiltrated every corner possible it moved out of the city and along the coastal resorts; silent, rapid and efficient. This makes it sound a bit like the British at work, colonising the East. And as with the British when they first ruled the waves, no one noticed the presence of any poison. Now the city began to flourish, business started to thrive and expand, export reached an all-time high and tourism rose gaily like a hot-air balloon. Abroad, in some glossy magazines which were mostly advertisements and little content, the island was described as the number one luxury holiday destination (although many foreigners had no idea where the hell it was. 'Is it near Burma', S.S. was *still* being asked, much to his annoyance).

Meanwhile, the poison from the two tightly-wrapped chicken legs carried on thriving. Had a psychologist analysed it, he or she would have found that the main ingredients were jealousy and superstition in equal parts, with two larger portions of inferiority and fear. A psychologist would have seen that conquering a race of people was a bad thing and could only lead to a mix-up of emotions. Then the psychologist, having seen the inevitability of Empire, would have told the people of the paradise island that toxic trouble of this kind was likely to take a few centuries to unravel. But there were no psychologists around. The war continued to rage with intensity. It was more prolonged than the Battle of Britain but with none of the media publicity that conflict had received.

In Basingstoke, S.S. had begun painting again. He painted a cricket match; his island home was famous for cricket, don't you know? Then he painted a beach with a glass-bottomed boat and after that he painted the coral reef where the pearl fishers swam. They were *beautiful* paintings, sensitive and refined. Very quickly, S.S. was hailed as the king of the magical fairy tale island that swam in its own azure cesspool of delight. Soon he was interviewed on radio and asked about his vision of the place. Soon he was writing many column-inches in newspapers about his great sadness over what was happening to his country. By this he meant the stupid war, stupid. He spoke with his soft island accent, sounding more sorrowful than angry. It was all in a day's work. Sue Ranasingha wasn't interested in what her husband was talking about. All she cared about was the fact that he was beginning to be noticed and this made her happy. She hadn't a clue, and neither had S.S., that he had trodden on some of the poison from the two chicken legs on his way to the airport. And some of the poison was still stuck to his feet.

It was at this interesting point, without fanfare or warning, that Angelina Petipa, (Christ, what sort of name is that?) came into view. Angelina Petipa was, pardon the expression, no spring chicken. She had spent most of her life dossing about on one useless dung-heap of experience or another. In those days she had had no ambition, no direction, no goal. Wasting her life, her mother always said, disapprovingly.

Angelina took no notice of her mother's words. As a child, having left the island by a circuitous route, she had washed up on British shores and proceeded to behave more or less as a savage might.

'Why not?' was her answer to any such accusation. 'It's what you white fellows expect, isn't it? I'm just giving you what you want!'

That's the no-good way she talked, without a shred of shame. Fearlessly. Scarily. Having come to Britain in this rough-and-tumble sort of way, living on her wits, pulling herself up by her dangerously-red fingernails, she had fallen into the role that was best categorized as eccentric/exotic (or ethnic/other to you). It was a new art form, this way of life. One that used personality like a corkscrew, boring out the obstructions, turning expectation on its head so that if you had been expecting a flowery bouquet, you got oak-scented notes and vice versa. Angelina Petipa was a South Asian with attitude who, because of the absence of tradition in her upbringing, didn't care a fig about anything much. A newspaper journalist interviewing her once asked her to comment on motherhood. She refused but then went on to volunteer the opinion that all men these days had become 'daddies' instead of fathers. When questioned on the difference she extrapolated that 'daddies' pushed the prams without any of the authority of fathers.

'Have you noticed the way they walk, head bowed, one child strapped to their back and one in a pushchair, while the wife walks by in her pedal-pushers holding on to the Care Bears and the BlackBerry?' she had sniffed.

'Do you have children?' the journalist asked her, startled.

'I'm thinking about it,' Angelina replied, adding, loudly, in case anyone was listening, 'wimps needn't apply.'

That was the sort of woman she was. Rough, tough and carrying her paradise colours in her hair extensions. Striding into the ring of bright saris that flapped in the breeze of Brixton market, ignoring the black-clad Muslim women – she'd been here long before them, after all, causing trouble *all* by herself. One morning, for no reason other than that she was bored, she decided she wanted to paint. Why? Who cares why? The fact was she felt she had something to *say* about the lousy way she had been treated in her island home. Ah! Here was the nub of it, emerging slowly.

'They're all shits,' she declared, referring to her countrymen. 'Shits without humour.'

Honestly, have *you* ever seen a laughing turd? What a thing to say! But then, there was no controlling Angelina, no talking reasonably to her, no suggesting discretion, diplomacy, that sort of normal British thing. She was South Asian, remember. Putting aside her many previous occupations (singing, dancing, writing lyrics), she stretched a canvas or two. It was the beginning of a great love affair between her and her paints.

She chose her colours with care. Mostly her palate was green, brown and yellow. Her uncle had been murdered in the fighting in the north of the island, along with her three cousins, her aunt and her sister. Angelina's own father had been tortured nearly to the point of death for marrying Angelina's mother, who came from the *other* side. Not that anyone knew any more which side *was* the other one. Foolishness over many, many years had confused the people of the paradise island. And now, of course, there was poison there too, don't forget. So Angelina chose army camouflage colours for her paintings, partly because she wanted to highlight the state of what was going on, and partly because they were the colours that torture victims fear most. Army. Murder. Death. Torture. Terrorists. She wrote the words angrily, high up on her studio wall. And then she began to paint.

What came out was startling. Untutored, rushed (although this was more to do with her character than anything else), starkly horrific, the paintings were nevertheless uncompromising in their message. STOP THE BLOODY HUMAN ABUSE! they screamed. For one whole year Angelina painted solidly in this way. She covered everything in paint: her studio floor, her hands and face, her best cardigan. One or two people noticed what she was doing. A journalist decided to write a piece about her in a local newspaper. She had a couple of radio interviews and, after this, a national newspaper took up her cause and wrote smartly about her work. Puzzled, people began stopping her on the street and asking her about the war in her island home.

'I didn't even know there was a war,' someone said.

'How long has it been going on for, did you say?'

One woman approached her for money. She was white, middle class and fat. She couldn't stop chattering and Angelina backed off, not liking the smell of her breath. It smelt of sly caution, if you can imagine what that smells like.

'I knew all about the war,' the woman confided in her loud, fat, very-white accent. 'I've been collecting for it. I mean, I've been collecting to go out there and work with the orphans.'

'Work with them?' Angelina asked. 'What d'you do? Help them with their homework?'

'Oh no,' the woman laughed, good-naturedly, not taking offence, too busy with her good cause to notice sarcasm when it was directed at her. 'We're helping them with their *lace-making*!'

For her next painting, Angelina showed a man with his head blown off and a piece of lace tied to his wrist. Then she sent the do-gooder woman two tokens from the city council car park.

After another year of furious painting, when she no longer owned a single item of clothing that wasn't covered in paint, Angelina had a stroke of good luck. A famous man, with lots of money to spare, bought two pieces of her work.

'Yippee!' screamed Angelina and she went out and bought two black, very expensive cardigans to replace the paint-splattered ones, a case of wine and some junk food. Just this once, just to show she could be contrary. Inevitably, two things happened. She spilled paint on her new clothes and she got noticed by the great and the good. And the not-so-great, and the not terribly good, too. Well, that's life, innit. Nothing's perfect. S.S. was one of those people who noticed her. I'm not going to tell you which category S.S. belonged to. This is a show-not-a-tell sort of story, okay?

The shit had hit the fan (and there was no humour in it, either.) It was quite by chance, in the manner of the best and worst of things, that S.S. saw an article about Angelina. An old colour supplement was lying on his studio floor, put there, I imagine, to stop the drips from his paintbrushes falling on the floor. Just as he was about to begin work for the morning, S.S. caught sight of an image. It was the painting of the man with his head blown off and the lace around his wrist. Underneath was the title, *Headless with Lace in Paradise,* followed by a photograph of Angelina Petipa. Well, of course, as soon as he saw her face, S.S. knew she was from the same part of the world as he was. He felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up at the same time as his face tightened in a lockjaw pose and his eyes bulged out. Bending like a robot, he picked up the supplement and began to read it. This is what it said:

> Angelina Petipa was born on the island of X and is a painter of remarkable ability. Young, talented and articulate, she addresses the state of her country in a direct and outrageous manner. 'No one,' she tells me, with a contemptuous curl of her pretty mouth, 'can be bothered with what is going on there. People are being killed hourly but the morons who have escaped to the West don't care a damn.' Strong stuff! As are the paintings themselves.

The effect of reading this small piece was instantaneous. S.S. got stomach cramp and had to rush to the bathroom. When he returned he found he was utterly incapable of doing any work.

'I'm going for a walk, Sue,' he mumbled.

And he left the house.

All that day and for most of the next he was in shock. He was a painter, had been one for as long as he could remember, working his way up the ladder, step by careful step. Painting was in his blood; it was what he was all about. His island home had been his sole inspiration. He alone had represented the country with his careful, thoughtful, luscious oils, with

his watercolours and his occasional etchings. God! Hadn't he built a career on it?

'Oh for goodness' sake. It's a good thing,' Sue said later, when he reluctantly told her what was eating him. (He wouldn't have done so, but she had noticed him running to the bathroom every few minutes and wondered what on earth was the matter with him.) She had laughed, startled. 'The more of you there are out there painting the quicker the island will get on the map, I would have thought.'

Silly, naive Sue with her bottle-blonde hair, thought S.S. nastily. Luckily he kept *that* thought to himself.

I'm the king, he told himself that night as he gargled in the bathroom.

'I'm the only one who put the island on the map,' he said to his wife.

'Oh rubbish!' said laughing Sue. She gave him a quick kiss. 'You're just jealous!'

S.S. looked at his wife with astonishment. He was rendered speechless by her disloyalty and crass amateur psychology. Perhaps he should never have married a white woman, perhaps he should have stayed on the island and not come back? he thought, panic-stricken. Perhaps – and here he paused, thinking furiously – he should *confront* the woman and tell her to stop painting? How dare she compete with him?

Sue had fallen asleep. Putting on his dressing gown, S.S. went back into his studio and switched on the light. There she was, the bitch, staring out from the colour supplement, bold as brass. No, he thought, shaking his head, there would be no point in talking to her, no point in telling her to stop. She was not the sort of woman to do as she was told. It was clear even from the crumpled image that this one would not be amenable to reason. A woman like this was a dangerous thing. He picked up the article and re-read it, holding the torn pages together under the lamplight. Angelina Petipa's father was from the north of the island and her mother was from the south. Enough said. That, of course, explained everything; she was a mixed bastard! These sorts of people were another ball game, thought S.S., shuddering. He turned off the light and went back into the house. Wandering into the kitchen he opened the fridge. Because he had felt so ill all day he hadn't eaten a thing. Now he was starving. His eyes alighted on a covered dish. On it were two chicken legs. S.S. stared at them. He had once heard that the servant woman back home used to try to put charms on people. His mother had told him that the results were never what the woman wanted. Well, what did it matter, he had no idea how to make a charm work, anyway. Briefly, he thought of his sleeping family.

'You're jealous!' Sue had said. And she had laughed.

S.S. frowned. What did she know of jealousy? She was an English woman. The world, as far as S.S. could see, passed his wife effortlessly by. She had had a head start, centuries before, he thought wearily, feeling as if he was drowning. He sighed, wiping his feet carefully. There were particles of some sort of dust sticking to them. Then, picking up one of the chicken legs unhappily, he began to eat. ◊

Two Poems

by Tishani Doshi

Dog in the Valley

Last night
I heard a dog
in the valley
puncturing the hills
with a sound
from a long
time ago.
It was the sound
of a man and woman
falling out of love,
the sound of a century
caught in the dark –
barking, barking.
A deep-throated howl
made under stars,
made against death,
insisting there are drums
underground,
cymbals in the clouds,
a music that goes on and on
because someone
somewhere
is listening.

How to Dream a Beautiful Death

In the dream of his death
Rinpoche returns to the room
of his youth – the wooden beams,
the barking dogs, the fields
of potato and wheat; his mother
with her prayer beads
by the window grilles,
muttering grace after grace;
his sister in the kitchen
preparing flasks of tea.

In the dream of his death
Rinpoche sits in a fur-lined coat
hemmed into the window light,
waiting for his father to come home
and hold him. *Gone, gone,*
his father says, *Gone altogether beyond*.
Because this is how he wants to go –
like an ochre flower in a field,
hungry and alive, the wind rushing in,
scattering him everywhere.

This is how it could be
in our own dreams of dying.
If we believed in mandalas, those maps
that guide us from periphery
to centre, and over to the other shore,
we'd know we're always where
we're meant to be – lying down
among the trees, covered in coats
of bark and mud, waiting for the sages
to lead us out of the forests, to the sea.

Untethered

by James Kelman

THEN I SAW the field.

How many days had I been here? Now I saw it, and knew that I could walk to it. There was no reason why I couldnt except I couldnt. I might walk to there. But I could not.

Had I no power? Had they stolen everything? It wasnt a dream. I was taken and I could not move. I could not move. Is that a joke? It seems like a horrible irony.

I didnt enter that so-called field and I wouldnt enter it. Was it mathematical? One day two day, then three, four and coming now to the tenth day, my senses said no, I was not going to be controlled by these damn forces. You know, fuck! It was not to happen. I was not going to allow it to happen.

What to dominate? Or even me, me to dominate. Okay I know myself and know my capabilities. I can rise to the occasion. Of course I can. If they thought I couldnt, if they thought that man they were wrong, they certainly were wrong. I would have challenged them there and then. I always challenged them anyway, I didnt worry about that. Why could I not enter that field? That to me was like a religious question, certainly logical, as though a logical field, therein the key man that is what I was thinking

You know I didnt have any trust in them. Why ask? No faith, nothing. Of course not. It was only a political position; there is no thing other than that, no morality, no goddam fuck all man so I did challenge them, and challenged them on that. Always. My very existence. There and then at that damn time man right in front of that so-called field, their so-called field, you know, what did they think! Make it a question and I shall answer: Of course, of course I saw it.

Were I allowed. I am not allowed. Even this, to have challenged them on this very point. Prove it! I shouted at them. Prove it to me. As of right you have got no authority. Any power you have you have stolen, you have stolen from people; peoples, plural. All the people of the world. I shouted that to them.

But something was spinning. Near to me. What is spinning? My fucking head! I could not discern. Was it near to me? Spinning near to me, if it is near to me.

I had to search. Then give in to it. If I had to sleep then remain where I was. It was no chair. It was no chair. Damn chair man it was not a chair. I know what a fucking chair looks like.

My finger too, fitting snugly; into my nostril, my ear, between the fifth and third toes of my right foot. That was my finger, talking about my finger, how come? The point of consciousness. I was not being tortured.

Where now here now.

Such reflection

My feet were bare. I might have laughed at that.

Even being there, and that field, what was that field, did I see a field? is this significant? or was it so? I thought Yeh, none of this is by chance.

A time passed. I rose from my chair. It was a chair!

My thoughts no longer raced ahead. What is reflection?

I would not have believed it possible. The place itself, the surroundings, these had changed me. And these long weeds, long long weeds, each time I saw them I wanted to lay me down to sleep, not even to sleep but lying there, with the long stalks, angling above to enclose me. This was a proper field. It had grass rather than symbols, a natural form, if logical.

I knew what to believe. They told me. It was a command. Believe what you know. Such was their advice. These bastards had no shame. They said to me: You have nothing.

I didnt seek information. They gave me it, what they wanted me to know. I preferred to discuss death and that other concept, that concept uhh humiliation; humiliation, of a people, peoples the world over.

I should not have acquiesced. If I did acquiesce. My reaction was if believing what you know was the more important, which surely it was

What followed. I can not remember.

But my reaction then was less than immediate. I acquiesced. I agreed to my own, my own

I do not accept 'degradation'. If the field was there to be entered.

What is a field? A simple area, bounded area. I too was bounded, I too am an area. My body is a fucking map of fucking humanity. Who is to deny that? The degradation that I suffer is the degradation of humanity.

If the affirmative can one deny it? Would one deny it? I put thoughts up to thwart more difficult thoughts you know and mediocrity, mediocrity is not the result.

Although one may predict the unlikely, as to the nature of it, grasping that, it is not feasible. Or is this also a banality, rooted in tautology. We go back and go back, and again.

The mind of a human being, this human being.

The field.

How many days? I think of days man I dont know and I am here and facing the field and I can enter, I could enter and I fucking dont man it is like the one and only the sole thing man, that area of conflict, ultimate one.

The brain is also composed, its constituents, each a field, stalks, weeds

One is commanded not to think but not to think becomes *to not think* which is activity of a cerebral kind. Thought in itself. My state is secular. And if I am part of a community, of a class or a caste, ethnic or communal division: state of mind. It is a fucking state of mind man I can forget what I am, a fucking human being man part of fucking humanity, of peoples, an individual.

I smile. I smile at these things. These things; such things. Such things *is* discriminatory. I might have chortled, chortled equalling to laugh aloud in an ironic manner, a manner approaching sarcasism, sarcasism – if not internalized to the extent it had to be. In order to exist it begins from internalization. The challenge is within me. My inner form is logical, not mathematical.

But what meaning does this have? Something lodged, existing within. A thing of myself, purely of myself.

The inquisitors. Those who foment

What is inhumanity? I dont fucking know what it is man I do not know what the fuck it is.

The gaolers cannot control this, you men of the state. Chortling is to be of humanity. Pushing authority, pushing

To be alive is the assumption of control, for this is reflection.

So the place had changed me. This was the fact, how do they say it, these foreigners, they have a way, that the 'ah' sound is 'ay', 'é.'

I am not a foreigner. They said I was.

These conundrums. Oh that you are, you are not; contradictions. They give me the language.

These logics, disappearing fields, the shapes, dissolving, disappearing dissolving, battered from my head, so gone, psychological truncheons and hammer blows, French terms for these assaults. I gave them the answer. These are the pillars. They sought the answer and eventually received it, received it from me. I absolve myself. Said with humour. Is there a question? I am no foreigner. Allow me to move. I moved. ◊

MEMOIR

The Man Who Loved Beautiful Things

Manju Kapur journeys around her father

To say learning was important to my father was an understatement. The desire to enlighten blazed in him with missionary zeal. His own life had been entirely shaped by education; it had raised him from the narrow *gallis* of Bareilly to principal of a college in Amritsar, to cultural attaché to the Indian embassy in the United States, to civil servant in the education ministry, to international cultural delegations, to Vice Chancellor of Sambalpur University.

Education gave him his friends – poets, musicians, dancers. It gave him his passion for books and music. It gave him his artistic sensitivity, his longings and his disappointments.

My father was a writer-in-waiting – waiting for the time he would be free from his job, his travels, his obligations, waiting for the security that would enable him to devote himself to his craft.

As a teacher he had published *The Art of Essay Writing* and an edition of *Julius Caesar*. Later on, as a civil servant, he had compiled textbook selections of prose and poetry for government schools under the name of his brother-in-law. Creating anthologies came easily to him: he was perpetually noting down things that struck him as he read, pencil in hand. But his real books lay in the future. One day he was going to put together all the thoughts and ideas he had collected, alongside all the poems he had translated from Hindi into English.

Or so I now imagine, forty years later. To his still growing children, his own ambitions were remote, unlike his expectations of them. My brother, who showed some talent for music, was made to play the violin – which he did in a screechy, amateurish way, and as for me, he wanted me to be a reader: not any old reader but a reader of the classics, the inheritor of all of his books, the one to carry the flame. Nothing made him happier than to see me immersed in reading Jane Austen, the Brontës, Shakespeare, the Elizabethan dramatists and all of their critics, whom I also devoured as storytellers.

I had my vices of course, the greatest of them being a passion for Georgette Heyer. Unfortunately I had to read her work in secret, dreading as I did his perpetual question 'What are you reading?' and, on hearing the truth, the subsequent disappointment that would so quickly turn to cold withdrawal.

My father's one act of violence against me concerned a book. 'What are you reading?' he asked one day, at home from the office for lunch. Defiantly, I turned the cover to show him a lurid picture of a man bent over a half naked woman. 'Regency Buck' it said in bold yellow letters over the top of the image. This sight so enraged my father that he slapped me. My glasses flew across the room and for a moment we both remained suspended in horrified silence. Then he crossed to the corner where the glasses lay, picked them up, examined the lenses, handed them to me and silently left. I resolved never to forgive him.

The irony of all this was that I was the only one of his children who had inherited his love of books. So for me his aspirations were by far the highest, and the punishment for failing to live up to them the harshest.

We grew up surrounded by my father's books. We ate next to Religion and Philosophy, socialized next to Art and Essays, slept next to Fiction and Poetry. And although we had little money and no more space, he was unable to resist buying the latest in drama, philosophy, history, religion, aesthetics, travel, memoir, letters, biography, essays, poetry and fiction (in both English and Hindi).

Returning home from my first day at college, now officially registered as a student of literature, I was greeted by the books he had bought to accompany me on my educational journey. Arranged on a table in the foyer of our home, the bright colours of the paperbacks gleamed in the afternoon sun: Andrew Wright on Jane Austen, critics on Keats and Tennyson, *The Romantic Imagination* by C.M. Bowra and more, much more. We were together in this, my father and I: my mother had wanted me to study Economics. 'All the time reading,' she would mutter disapprovingly. 'You live in a dream world! What you need is reality, balance…' (Economics, in short.)

In addition to attempting to mould his children, my father also tried with his natal family. He wanted to uplift them as he had himself been lifted, but they stubbornly remained creatures of the *galli* (his words) refusing to countenance anything outside that world. Those same gallis had once been my father's home and sometimes he marvelled at how far he had come. How did he manage with no advantages? From an early life that was purely Hindi-speaking to fluent in English and a lover of the classics in music and literature of both East and West – what had it taken to make that transition?

To see the home in Bareilly where he

had been born was to wonder still more. It was traditionally built with small rooms around a courtyard, the polluting toilets placed next to the outer gates, a paved area before the house, a bathing room inside with a long handled pump, a row of kitchens, then steps leading up to the terrace and a single storeroom on top. A few beds answered sitting and sleeping needs, while cooking, eating and studying were all done on the floor.

My uncles ran small-time, erratic businesses. Their futures were mapped from the *galli* to the shop around the corner and their education hadn't taken them past the local vernacular school. Their marriages were arranged early and babies followed steadily. Various aunts cooked on separate fires in the long narrow kitchen, reflecting the alliances and hostilities among them. On the times we visited, my father was always the centre of attention while we shrank from the questions that issued from his family's *paan*-stained mouths, the friendly faces unable to mask their overwhelming curiosity.

My father felt the gap between himself and his family keenly. He was perennially sending them money (the cause of frequent quarrels between my parents – not outright quarrels, but the fact that we were always short had something to do with *them*. Nothing was ever enough, *they* were a bottomless pit.) He felt he owed them. From the time his mother sold her jewellery to send him to England he was obligated to them in a way that pressed heavily on him, though in actual fact he had paid off his debt some years before. Nonetheless, money his family could ill afford had been spent on him.

From Bareilly he had gone to Allahabad to take his MA. From there on to England, for a chance at the Indian Civil Service exam, even though the quota from India was miniscule and it was extremely difficult to get in. (This was the exam he didn't pass. As he remembered, 'I stayed up the whole night to study. I knew all the answers, but I was too tired. I missed by one mark. One mark! They took five candidates and I was the sixth.' All his life that one mark haunted him.) Stung by shame, he stayed on in England to take a BLitt. In his books I have from that time, his name is inscribed 'Raghuvansha Kishore Kapur, St Catherine's, Oxford'. But it was always Oxford he talked of, never his college. Oxford was the holy grail: the place where he had learned to appreciate poetry, art, literature – all of the things that formed his sensibility. The beauty of the word, the sentence; the shades of a painting; the sound of classical music; these became a religion that he followed intensely all his life.

An Oxford degree was something, but it was not a job. During his passage back to India, he spent dejected hours on the deck of the ship musing over his lack of prospects. Also aboard was Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, returning from his post as Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions and Ethics at Oxford. 'Young man, what is the matter?' he demanded. And following the answer came the offer of a job at Waltair in Andhra Pradesh.

Two years later my father heard of a vacancy in Hindu Sabha College, Amritsar, through his friend Sirajuddin, fellow Oxonian and a man he always spoke of in glowing terms. The salary was 200 rupees more: his financial obligations were heavy, and he would be close to Siraj and near to Bareilly. He applied, the job was his. He moved next door to my mother's house, and he, his wife, his daughter, mother and the rest became the history of our little family.

MY FATHER was born on 12 March 1909. His intelligence manifested itself from an early age. Taken to school by his elder brother, he was found too young for his class. Easy, said his brother, and added several months to his actual age, putting it down on his certificate as September 1908. Raghuvansha was now enrolled in school but in later years this friendly adjustment to give him a head start proved to be the cause of much grief as his retirement approached. 'Other people give out their ages as one, two, three years less – but here am I, not yet fifty-eight and will be forced to leave before my time.'

We looked stricken. Circumstances, and my father's impractical romantic

nature, meant we had nowhere to live. We were entirely dependent on the housing that came with my father's job. What was going to happen now that a few precious months earlier than expected we were to be thrown out of the place we had grown up in?

'Can't you tell them how old you really are?'

'No proof.' (Heavy sighs accompanied this.)

My father's tenure unjustifiably over, we left. The house that was morally ours was allotted to another government servant. And one year later my father was dead. His bewildered children were nineteen and twenty, and his widow, still only fifty years old, would spend the next forty years searching for a permanent home.

My mother's anxiety about our finances ran through our childhood. My father liked to live largely. No one dressed like him, no one entertained like him and no one shopped like him. Once a painting, newly bought, was hung in a carefully selected spot: 'Look at it from this angle, from the right, from the left,' he would say, 'See how the expression changes!' At the end of the demonstration my mother would remark, 'We have money problems, yet Vansho buys things every day.' And my father's face would fall, like a bird brought down in flight.

What were his vices? That he loved beautiful things, that he wanted to possess them, that he was an aesthete and a dandy when he should have been a middle class homemaker, saving for the future.

As we approached adolescence, in addition to the spectre of homelessness, my father's ill health hung ominously over us. His first heart attack had been luckily detected by a doctor who had taken a pain in his chest seriously enough to hospitalize him. 'Borrowed time, I am living on borrowed time,' he liked to proclaim. But it didn't take long for the temporal loan to be called in: a few days short of his sixtieth birthday my father suffered a massive cardiac arrest and died alone in a hotel room in Madrid. His body was embalmed, placed in a coffin and returned to Delhi in the hold of a plane. I watched, feeling numb, as the unfamiliar box was opened and there, cradled in white satin, lay a stranger in a black pin-striped suit, his face blue, his nose stuffed with cotton, his eyes shut for ever. Gingerly, my father's brothers lifted him out. A collective wail went up. He was so young, so unmarred! At that point, my uncles must have wondered what price education, renown, travel, if it meant you died alone, so far from home and family.

A pundit had once declared my father's horoscope to be that of a king, promising fame, glory and great achievement. But he would die young, as kings often did. Now that moment had come.

In due course, I became a writer.

'We all have a purpose,' my mother told me one day, moved by the fact that I was doing what my father had always wanted to do himself, 'and yours is to fulfil your father's dream.' I had never seen my purpose in such terms but she had lived with my father's dreams, whereas I had only resisted them. If it made her happy to see me as a continuation of him, then for once I would not argue with her.

Soon after I published my first novel, Professor Datta, an old student of my father's, accosted me. He began by congratulating me and was warm in his appreciation. 'But –' and here he looked at me severely. I became nervous.

For narrative reasons I had drawn upon my parents' lives, secure that I could freely represent my teacher-lover in the way the story needed, without offence to anybody. My mother, who was likely to be most concerned, had been given an early draft to vet. 'If there is anything you feel I shouldn't say, tell me now.'

My mother was never one to discuss her feelings. When she finished the manuscript all she did was sigh.

'What? What is it?'

'How much I troubled my parents.'

That was hardly the thrust of the book and I spent some time pointing out that the author's intention had not been to apportion blame but to put a certain act in a historical, social and familial context. She had looked her usual resigned self, but went on to support me as much as she could, answering my questions and introducing me to others who could fill the gaps in her memory, to help with final details. After such help, I didn't think I needed anybody else's approval. I certainly hadn't thought of my father's *students,* belonging to a past before I was even born. But here stood one, a small fair handsome man, with flushed pink cheeks and fluffy white hair.

As he fixed me with a beady gaze, he shook his head sorrowfully. 'You have not been fair to your father.'

His agitation was reflected by my own, well hidden guilt. In truth, I knew I would never have been able to recreate the long years of my parents' courtship had my father been alive. I would never have been able to take liberties with a character based, however loosely, on him. (It could only ever be loose, because the truth was that I didn't really know my father. I had no first-hand knowledge of what drew people to him or what made him such an enduring influence in their lives, so much so that aeons later they could feel the pain of an ungrateful daughter.)

'It's only a novel,' I said, 'not a true portrait.'

Professor Datta brushed this weak argument aside. 'Your father was a scintillating man. You have not done him justice,' he went on.

'Fictional,' I repeated.

'Now you must write a book about him. Representing him as he really was.'

He fell into silence. I looked at him, remembering the young man he had been and how much my father had loved him. I recalled his visits to our house in Delhi and the urgent discussions as to his future. Should he make a career out of academia, or should he do something more likely to gain money and prestige? There were certain pressures operating, certain authority figures coercing, and in all this my father was his support against the Philistines. I envied him his uncomplicated feelings. I too wished to have known this brilliant man – but the daughter can never be the student.

'Your father didn't look after himself.' Again the professor shook his head. 'How he loved to talk! He had such a dancing, sparkling mind, leaping over everything under the sun. We visited him after his heart attack; he talked from five o'clock to ten. I kept saying, 'Kapur Sahib, don't take this lightly, look after yourself . . .'

Now we both became pensive, united for a moment in this loss, as we thought of the man talking his way to further illness, wasting the energy he could so ill afford to lose.

This essay was written with input from Dr V.N. Datta, and is dedicated to Ira Singh.

On Myrmecology and the Mahabharata

by Abha Dawesar

The *Mahabharata* advises each person to concentrate on his duty, leaving the result to fate, the duty itself determined by the person's standing and situation. In the Sanskrit epic, Dronacharya, the teacher of the king's court, fights on the side of the king's one hundred evil sons even if much of his heart is with the Pandavas because that is his duty. Karna, the son of Kunti, like the other Pandavas abandoned at birth and taken in by the Kauravas, fights on the side of the one hundred evil sons as his loyalties demand.

The good guys in the *Mahabharata* are the Pandavas and the bad guys the Kauravas. The Pandavas use strategies and tactics on the battlefield that are unfair at times. Righteousness is determined by where one chooses to draw the line – and if one examines only what takes place on the battlefield then one would be hard-pressed to conclude the Pandavas are much better than the Kauravas. In order for justice to weigh on the side of the Pandavas one has to go back to the cause of war: their return from exile to claim back their kingdom and Duryodhana's refusal to hand it over, his lust for power having got the better of him. The first time round the Pandavas had gambled away their kingdom, called misfortune upon themselves, accepted responsibility and made themselves scarce. It was only fair when they returned that Duryodhana should give them back their kingdom according to the original terms of the contract. Keeping one's promise, not breaching the contract, was a crucial element of justice. However, once war was declared one could lay this aside: the means began justifying the ends. Lying was allowed in the epoch of the *Mahabharata* as torture is allowed five thousand years later in the twenty-first century.

The *Mahabharata* illuminates how to live a life: duty is its centrepiece and loyalty the intrinsic standard to understanding where one's duty lies. But if loyalty lies at the heart of duty what then lies at the heart of loyalty? Belonging?

In one taped interview the myrmecologist Edward O. Wilson can be seen tracing an invisible line on cardboard with a fine stick dipped in a pheromone. He traces a zigzag, a random line with no pattern. His experimental ants then trail the line in seconds, picking up the scent. They will go anywhere that aroma takes them. They will work, they will give the food out of their own mouths, they will take out the trash from their colony, they will kill or die for that smell. Following a downpour that wiped off the trail to their colony, one group of worker ants of the *Labidus praedator* genus followed each other's smell in a circle until they died from exhaustion. Loyalty in the ant world is self-evident: it is belonging. In the world of humans it is a more complex business, our race no superorganism. We are a social species perpetually walking the tightrope between individual desires and the common good, personal longing and peer pressure, independence and the need for security, the dictates of reason and those of the heart.

On the eve of the war the Pandavas have their share of misgiving about killing their cousins and uncles. Taking arms against Dronacharya means violating the most basic tenet of the teacher-student relationship. Ever pragmatic, Krishna suggests they sacrifice one of the family fighting on their side so that they can get used to shedding the blood of their own relatives. Iravan offers himself on the condition that he be married off first; if someone will mourn his death then his life shall not have been in vain. Krishna obliges them all by turning himself into a woman and marrying Iravan, after which Iravan is sacrificed to Kali, the terrifying form of Durga, to ensure victory for the Pandavas. Krishna, as Mohini, mourns him; she smashes her wedding bangles on the hard ground and weeps looking up at the moon.

Each year, even now, thousands of Mohinis – modern-day transsexuals and transvestites – make pilgrimage to mourn Iravan's death. They dress as brides for one night and then break their glass bangles. As drops of blood trickle down their wrists they shed tears for their husband who died for a battle. Iravan was not the only one who died; the Pandavas won the war only after they had ravaged every living leaf on the plain of Kurukshetra. And yet Iravan, the son of Arjuna, is the only one mourned in this way today. Arjuna's other son Abhimanyu, who heroically entered the complex battle formation of the Chakravyuha in the full knowledge that he did not know the way out, is not mourned. Dead at sixteen, with no festivals held in his honour, Abhimanyu saved himself from anonymity by fathering a son who became, according to one legend, the only survivor of the bloody battle other than the five Pandava brothers. Does his genetic triumph trump the sentimental immortality of Iravan?

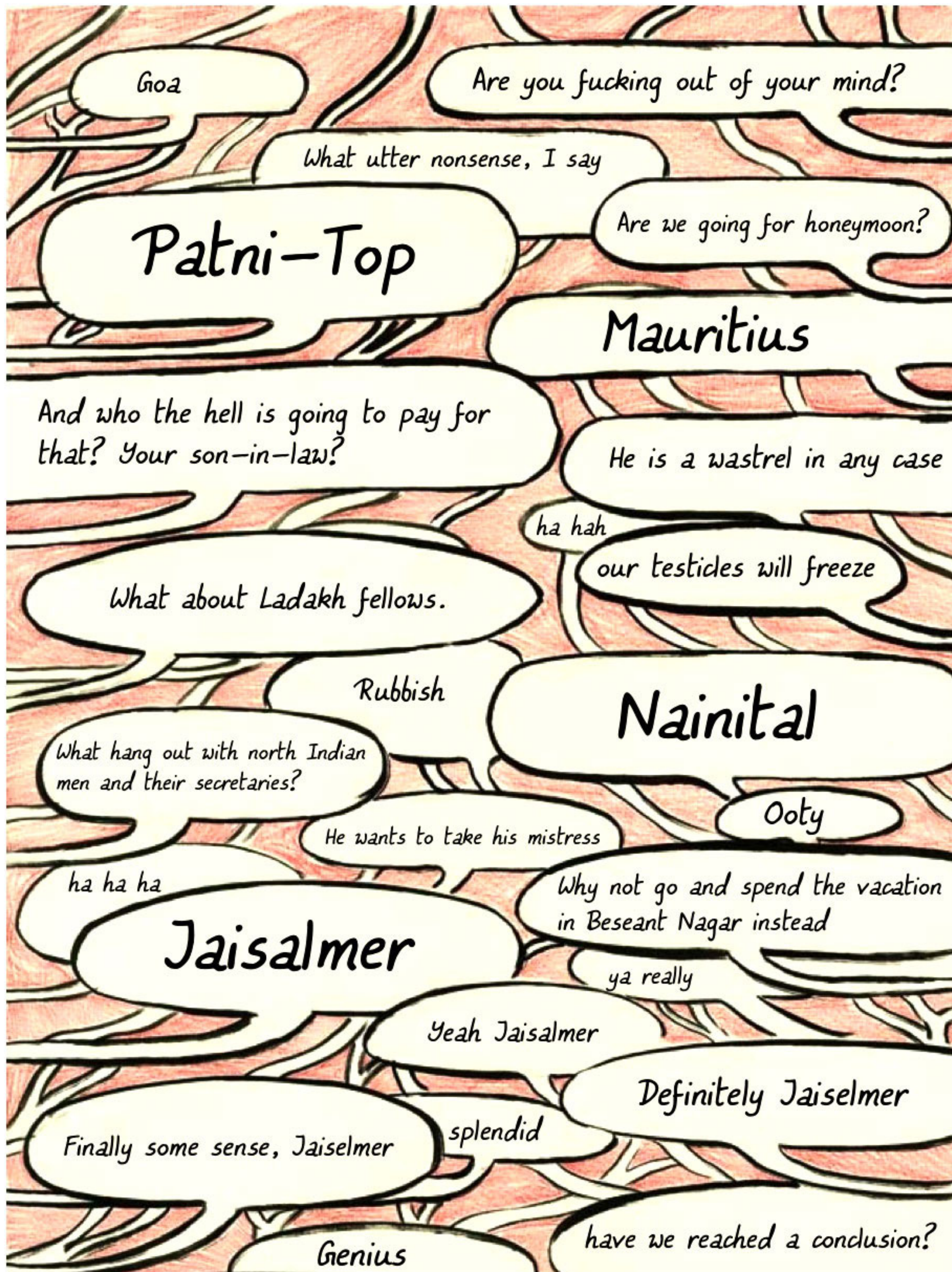
Ants in a colony, all of whom are related, have markers to identify their own. They follow the aromatic hydrocarbon scent of their siblings. They exclude non-kin from their colony and they show preferential aid for their direct relations . The queen of an ant colony might lay clutches of eggs fathered by multiple males, and in these cases a worker ant is less likely to help a half-sibling than a full one. At the end of the day they are not all that different from us (the idiomatic expression 'step-motherly treatment' is no metaphor).

A simple molecular signature guides ants, and they follow it. There is a beetle that has learnt to deceive a species of ant called *Myrmecaphodius excavaticollis* by stealing its molecular signature. An ant colony has a strong fetid smell and, by hiding in it, its shell withdrawn for a couple of days, this beetle takes on the scent. The ants don't realize they have a foreigner in their midst and the beetle lives among them. They cannot see its differences, because it shares their scent, so they do not fight it. None of the thousands of ant species in the world have to ask themselves why they attack non-kin or what kinship is. They don't have to justify raids and assassinations of neighbours, or produce intricate political arguments on how to handle illegal immigrants. If they had to, the molecular signature of the hydrocarbon they share with their colony would be reason unto itself.

We, on the other hand, have no such intrinsic reasoning, and the pheromones and scents that infiltrate our universe

must battle it out with logic, the gravitational pull of an indifferent solar system and the religious or cultural beliefs we might hold. Thus the entire study of human history and the claim of the social sciences is about excavating facts and telling stories that claim to go beyond the egocentricity of individual choices.

Ant kin selection relies on spatial distribution, an ant from the immediate vicinity is likely to belong to the same colony. On another scale, that of planet Earth, geographic formations – liquid, solid, and tectonic – help to loosely define the boundaries of a country. India, for example, is contained in a space between three water bodies in the south, east and west, and hemmed in by the Himalayas in the north. What the myremecologist studies with careful academic analysis and precise nomenclature is diffuse and much less precise in human society. Frontiers are porous: we have moved around, we've mixed and mated with strangers. ◊



FICTION

The Aromatherapist's Husband

By Leila Aboulela

SHE TOLD him that Mother Teresa had visited her in a dream. Adam braced himself for the consequences. 'She invited me to work in her orphanage in Calcutta', the steam from Elaine's green tea shimmered between them.

'We'll save up to get you there,' he replied. This was his style, to humour her and at the same time nudge her towards practicality. She had tears in her eyes now as she launched into a description of the dream. The feeling of being chosen, of having the ability to help others, of possessing a power, a gift. There were so many things Adam would rather save up for than trekking half-way across the world. It startled him that he could imagine her travelling without him.

He had always considered himself to be the perfect balance for Elaine. She would be up in the clouds or, more precisely, up in the attic, while he fixed the girls' swing in the garden or took the cat to the vet. Elaine was always on the move, not necessarily forward but sideways, up, across. She was a chess piece that made her own rules.

When they had first met at college, she was studying nutrition and he was doing metalwork. She talked all the time about books she'd read or programmes on the television about the supernatural. She didn't seem to notice that Adam was only half-listening, captivated by the movement of her lips, her energy that seemed to ignite and propel him.

His family didn't approve of her. They said that she was too different, but Adam didn't care. Their objections sounded irrelevant and too late. After the wedding, Elaine started teaching yoga in the local centre. Neither pregnancy deterred her. She opted for a natural birth each time and used essential oils to cope with the pain. Her interest in alternative medicine started then. Throughout the years she breast-fed the girls; she was reading and studying for a long-distance aromatherapy qualification.

Adam was the one who converted the attic into a treatment room. He put shelves on the walls and carried up the special massage bed. In no time, Elaine managed to cram the whole wall with crystals, burners, jars and bottles. Her clients trooped up the stairs, ignoring Adam as he sat watching Disney DVDs with the girls. Elaine's business was picking up but she let the housework slide. Under Adam's bare feet, the carpet was gritty with cereal and crumbs.

'When was the last time you hoovered?' he called up to her. He was already opening the utility cupboard to get the vacuum cleaner.

She skipped down the stairs, her eyes bright and almost breathless. 'I saw an angel,' she said. 'A little angel flying past. He came to take a bad vibe away.'

The next weekend she went away to a meditation retreat. A month later she spent a whole week at a psychic fair and came back with a photo of her aura captured by a special camera. Adam stared at the red, yellow and green lights billowing around her familiar face. 'You look like a witch,' he said.

Elaine gave him a fierce look. 'I consulted a psychic. She told me I have the healing gift.'

'But you know that already,' he said. 'You've helped so many people.' She had helped him too, massaging the small of his back with lavender essence mixed with warm jojoba oil.

'There's more,' she said. 'The psychic said my healing guide is a Red Indian. And another is a Somali warrior.'

Adam snorted. 'You're wasting good money on these sessions. You need to focus on your work.'

'No, I need to learn to channel my energy and communicate with my guides. Then I would be able to read the forces surrounding my clients. I would be able to work *with* my guides.'

Geranium for PMT, petunia for a sluggish kidney, clary sage for mood swings. The scents of the oils hung around him. He could only shake them off when he got to work. He worked night-shifts as a welder. As he napped during the day, he would hear the New Age music coming down from above him.

Another black cat loped around the house. Elaine made sure they ate vegetarian cat-food. For the family, she cooked wholesome, organic meals even though Adam sometimes protested. When he craved red meat, he had to go and sit alone in Burger King.

That summer she took the girls and disappeared for two weeks. Adam started to put on the weight she had shielded him from. He lost the daily blessing of the two little ones. Often he was worried but they came back tanned and healthy. He hugged the girls and watched Elaine move around the house dressed like a gypsy.

'We travelled with the fair,' she explained. 'From city to city. The weather was perfect. We picked strawberries and had picnics on the beach. These girls haven't watched television in all the time they were away!' She sounded like she was boasting.

Adam felt even more left out. 'Aren't you going to ask what I've been doing?'

She folded her arms across her chest and said in a flat voice, 'So what have you been up to?'

He deliberately went through his boring routine, hour after hour, day after day.

But she had had enough, 'You should have just come with us. Why didn't you?'

'Because you never asked me,'' he shouted.

He had taken the night off work to be with her but she sat up in bed hugging her knees as if she was in pain, 'There is so much I want to do, so much I want to see. I should have been in India by now.'

'It's not practical. It never was. There's the girls to consider, the house . . .'

'You go on about the same things but I am ahead of you, Adam.' She rocked from side to side. 'I am so so ahead of you now.'

'This marriage is over, isn't it,' he said.

The next day Elaine propped up a *For Sale* sign in the garden. And everything happened very fast after that. ◊

'Marriage is no simple matter'

M.K. Gandhi on the moment he tied the knot

Much as I wish that I had not to write this chapter, I know that I shall have to swallow many such bitter draughts in the course of this narrative. And I cannot do otherwise, if I claim to be a worshipper of Truth. It is my painful duty to have to record here my marriage at the age of thirteen. As I see the youngsters of the same age about me who are under my care, and think of my own marriage, I am inclined to pity myself and to congratulate them on having escaped my lot. I can see no moral argument in support of such a preposterously early marriage.

Let the reader make no mistake. I was married, not betrothed. For in Kathiawad there are two distinct rites – betrothal and marriage. Betrothal is a preliminary promise on the part of the parents of the boy and the girl to join them in marriage, and it is not inviolable. The death of the boy entails no widowhood on the girl. It is an agreement purely between the parents, and the children have no concern with it. Often they are not even informed of it. It appears that I was betrothed thrice, though without my knowledge. I was told that two girls chosen for me had died in turn, and therefore I infer that I was betrothed three times. I have a faint recollection, however, that the third betrothal took place in my seventh year. But I do not recollect having been informed about it. In the present chapter I am talking about my marriage, of which I have the clearest recollection.

It will be remembered that we were three brothers. The first was already married. The elders decided to marry my second brother, who was two or three years my senior, a cousin, possibly a year older, and me, all at the same time. In doing so there was no thought of our welfare, much less our wishes. It was purely a question of their own convenience and economy.

Marriage among Hindus is no simple matter. The parents of the bride and the bridegroom often bring themselves to ruin over it. They waste their substance, they waste their time. Months are taken up over the preparations – in making clothes and ornaments and in preparing budgets for dinners. Each tries to outdo the other in the number and variety of courses to be prepared. Women, whether they have a voice or not, sing themselves hoarse, even get ill, and disturb the peace of their neighbours. These in their turn quietly put up with all the turmoil and bustle, all the dirt and filth, representing the remains of the feasts, because they know that a time will come when they also will be behaving in the same manner.

It would be better, thought my elders, to have all this bother over at one and the same time. Less expense and greater *éclat*. For money could be freely spent if it had only to be spent once instead of thrice. My father and my uncle were both old, and we were the last children they had to marry. It is likely that they wanted to have the last best time of their lives. In view of all these considerations, a triple wedding was decided upon, and as I have said before, months were taken up in preparation for it.

It was only through these preparations that we got warning of the coming event. I do not think it meant to me anything more than the prospect of good clothes to wear, drum beating, marriage processions, rich dinners and a strange girl to play with. The carnal desire came later. I propose to draw the curtain over my shame, except for a few details worth recording. To these I shall come later. But even they have little to do with the central idea I have kept before me in writing this story.

So my brother and I were both taken to Porbandar from Rajkot. There are some amusing details of the preliminaries to the final drama – e.g. smearing our bodies all over with turmeric paste – but I must omit them.

My father was a Diwan, but nevertheless a servant, and all the more so because he was in favour with the Thakore Saheb. The later would not let him go until the last moment. And when he did so, he ordered for my father special stage coaches, reducing the journey by two days. But the fates had willed otherwise. Porbandar is 120 miles from Rajkot – a cart journey of five days. My father did the distance in three, but the coach toppled over in the third stage, and he sustained severe injuries. He arrived bandaged all over. Both his and our interest in the coming event was half destroyed but the ceremony had to be gone through. For how could the marriage dates be changed? However, I forgot my grief over my father's injuries in the childish amusement of the wedding.

I was devoted to my parents. But no less was I devoted to the passions that flesh is heir to. I had yet to learn that all happiness and pleasure should be sacrificed in devoted service to my parents. And yet, as though by way of punishment for my desire for pleasures, an incident happened, which has ever since rankled in my mind and which I will relate later. Nishkulanand sings: 'Renunciation of objects, without the renunciation of desires, is short-lived, however hard you may try.' Whenever I sing this song or hear it sung, this bitter untoward incident rushes to my memory and fills me with shame.

My father put on a brave face in spite of his injuries, and took full part in the wedding. As I think of it, I can even today call before my mind's eye the places where he sat as he went through the different details of the ceremony. Little did I dream then that one day I would severely criticize my father for having married me as a child. Everything on that day seemed to me right and proper and pleasing. There was also my own eagerness to get married. And as everything that my father did then struck me as beyond reproach, the recollection of those things is fresh in my memory. I can picture to myself, even today, how we sat on our wedding dais, how we performed the *Saptapadi*[1], how we, the newly wedded husband and wife, put the sweet *Kansar*[2] into each other's mouth, and how we began to live together, and oh! that first night. Two innocent children all unwittingly hurled themselves into the ocean of life. My brother's wife had thoroughly coached me about my behaviour on the first night. I do not know who had coached my wife. I have never asked her about it, nor am I inclined to do so now. The reader may be sure that we were too nervous to face each other. We were certainly too shy. How was I to talk to her, and what was I to say? The coaching could not carry me far. But no coaching is really necessary in such matters. The impressions of the former birth are potent enough to make all coaching superfluous. We gradually began to know each other, and to speak freely together. We were the same age. But I took no time in assuming the authority of a husband.

[1] *Saptapadi* are seven steps a Hindu bride and bridegroom walk together, making at the same time promises of mutual fidelity and devotion, after which the marriage becomes irrevocable.

[2] *Kansar* is a preparation of wheat which the pair partake of together after the completion of the ceremony.

Sofia

by Henning Mankell

ABOUT FIFTEEN years ago a little girl was sitting in a rusty wheelchair outside the central hospital of Maputo, the capital of Mozambique. The girl had no legs and she was perhaps ten years old. When I passed I stopped and exchanged a few words with her. I still do not know why. Although she almost whispered I understood that her name was Sofia.

Today, many years later, Sofia is one of my closest and dearest friends. No one has taught me as much as she has about the condition of being human. Nor has anyone taught me more about poor people's unprecedented powers of resistance, about those who are forced to survive at the bottom of society in a world we all share and inhabit; so unjust, brutal and unnecessary.

That last word is very important. Unnecessary. One of the hardest things about our day and age is that so much suffering is unnecessary. While writing this sentence yet another child dies unnecessarily of malaria. At the same time, millions of children will not be able to read this – for them these words will be nothing more than mysterious signs, which they simply do not have the knowledge to understand. Being a writer as I am, I feel that is perhaps the biggest disgrace today; that millions and millions of children are forced to live a life where they are denied the fundamental human right to learn how to read and write.

However, back to the girl in the wheelchair.

What happened to Sofia was that she and her sister were running along a small road close to the village where she lived with her mother and her other siblings. It was early morning; mist above the fields, the sun just rising above the horizon. Sofia knew very well that she and her sister should keep to the road. There were things she called 'earth crocodiles' buried in the ground by the side of the road and they could snap at you.

The girls were running. Children play, as it is their given right. And they forget, which is also their given right.

Looking back, it is possible to reconstruct the events that followed in a very precise way.

With her right foot Sofia accidentally stepped on the side of the road. She put her foot on a landmine. However, the mine had been placed in the ground in such a manner that the major part of the explosion that followed was directed at her sister Maria, who died instantly. Sofia was brought to the hospital, drenched in her own blood.

I have spoken to the doctor who took care of Sofia when she arrived at the hospital.

He said:

> I will now tell you something that no doctor ever should. Nevertheless, I will do it so you will fully comprehend the remarkable strength of this young girl.

He said:

> Since she was so seriously damaged, we were hoping that Sofia would die along with her sister. Her legs were torn apart, her chest blown to pieces, everything.

Yet Sofia survived. She had greater strength than the entire military industrial complex which had tried to take her life, and which continues to hold the poor hostage, the poor who cannot defend themselves on equal terms. Within her body and mind Sofia carried with her the strong will to resist of the poor people of the world.

And she overcame. She survived.

Today, Sofia has two children. She is a very good seamstress, she studies and she wants to become a teacher. But more than this she has become a symbol all around the world for the resistance against the use of landmines. For many young people she has become a heroine.

And she is a heroine for me as well.

If I should mention one moment when I experienced profound happiness in my life, it was probably the time I saw Sofia walk with her new artificial legs. At that very moment I also claimed what would later be my, as well as Sofia's, motto in life:

'It is never too late! Everything is still possible!'

At the time of the accident, Sofia was illiterate. Now, she is able to write down her own experiences, her understandings and her dreams. Furthermore, she can write down what she opposes.

Her two children are well cared for; her thoughts about the future are filled with hope.

Nevertheless, there are moments when I see her turn away, leaning against her crutches; moments when she does not want to be part of what is going on.

These moments are usually when people around her dance. To a European woman it might not be such a big a deal. But to an African woman? I completely understand.

Once her life was blown apart. But she resisted, she fought back. Nothing could defeat her.

What Sofia brings me is hope, hope for the future. Her indomitable spirit cannot be broken.

Translated by Robert Johnsson

Adventures of a Photographer

Dayanita Singh

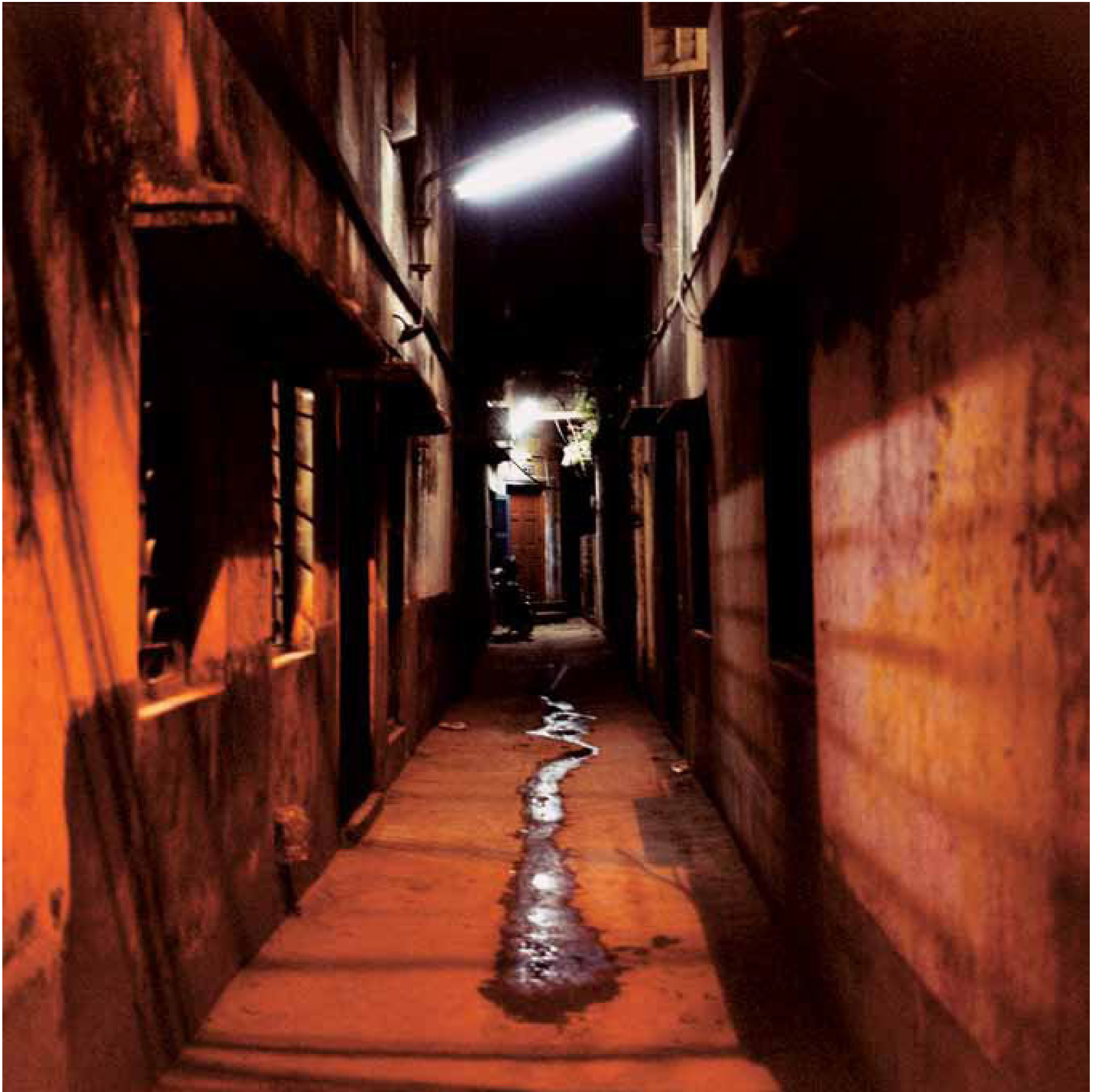
A Dream Villa photographer exchanged her dowry to study photography in America in 1988.

On her return to India she met a very unique eunuch in Old Delhi and, thirteen year's later, they made *Myself Mona Ahmed*. Mona wrote her life story in the form of emails to Scalo publisher Walter Keller. The book was launched by the Swiss Ambassador in the graveyard where Mona now lives.

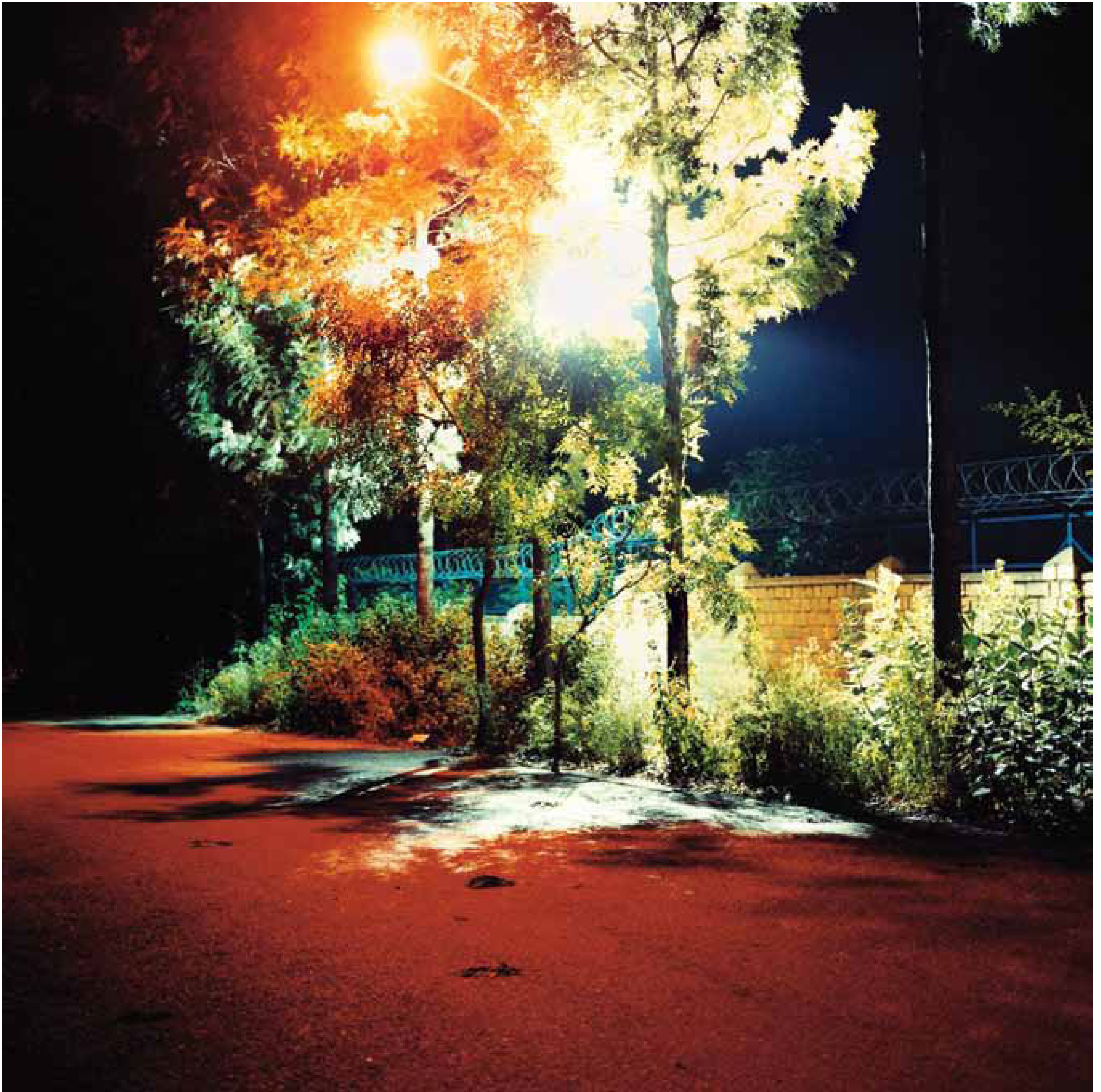
In 1999 she returned to the mystic's ashram in Varanasi where her father had wanted her to live and to study. Some years after his and the mystic's passing, she made *I am as I am*. In 2008 this became one of the seven accordion-fold books in *Sent a Letter*.

Even the family portraits she made as *Privacy* in 2003 felt constrictive. She longed for more space; she explored *Empty Spaces*. Her terrain expanded and,years later, she found colour, more specifically the blue of daylight film used after sunset. In 2008 she made *Blue Book*, a set of 23 postcards.

During her travels with Professor Tungabhadra she chanced upon this Poppy Moment. She recognised the emotion; she had been there before. She returned to her contact sheets and made *Go Away Closer* with Steidl in 2007.



And then came the terror of the night. She had crossed over to the other side. Nothing was as it seemed to be, the world was topsy-turvy and the moon was just the night's ornament. The landscape existed in her head, it had no geography; she never knew where in the world it would present itself, or when she would meet its inhabitants. But when she encountered them, she recognised them instantly. In 2010 this 'nocturnal vacation' turned into *Dream Villa*.



Why does it matter where she made this picture? What does the location satisfy except your curiosity? The where and when of photography are constricting, as is the question of who made the picture, Indian eyes or Swiss ones? It's boring.

'I fall into a place and I become of that place,' replied Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak when asked, during a public conversation in Calcutta, whether she would describe herself as cosmopolitan. 'I feel sometimes, when someone asks me the question, that I have roots in air. You know? I am at home everywhere and I am not at home anywhere. It seems to me when one is at home, the place where one is at home has no name.'

Adapted from Dayanita Singh, *a survey co-published by Penguin India and Fundación Mapfre*.