

## SHORT STORY

NERAM

(translated by V. Surya)

She felt uncomfortable all over. The touch of the sun overhead made her whole body feel sticky. She loosened the end of her sari and mopped herself.

Sullen with the tedium of planting, her mind would not run along with the teasing chatter of the women working in the rows nearby. The landlady who owned these wetlands sat under the neem tree near the well, her legs stretched out. How could any creature sit all day in one place like that, as if hammered down into the ground?

One woman asked, "What, Annaamalai, looks like you're thinking hard about something."

She scratched herself where the *murungai* weeds had poked her and raised an itch.

"Thinking! What's the use of it?"

"No use..."

Another cut in. "Why, di, are you pregnant?"

"Who knows? Could be..."

"Baby's not even sitting up yet. Fine thing it'll be if you start being sick all over again."

They all snickered.

The fields were criss-crossed with rows of women, as though hung with festoons. Down by the canal, a row of palm trees stretched all the way to the upper irrigation channel. There, too, swarms of women moved about in the low-lying fields.

Having let the water into the channel, a farmhand descended the slope of the bank. On the way down, he went past the sari-cradle she had slung on the branch of a blackthorn tree before he turned away towards the main canal.

He wouldn't have gone off without telling her, would he, if the child had been crying?

She felt a gush of milk. Her breasts tingled and turned hard. It had started to hurt a little. Shaking off the earth from her fingers, she tightened her bodice and tucked in her sari-end.

The wind helpfully rocked the cradle hanging from the thorn-tree. The baby thrust his small hand out of the hammock. It swung with the wind.

Look at that boy--so deeply he's sleeping! Does he sleep like this in the house? All night he sucks me dry! A fine rascal he is, lying there now like that!

She pressed down one breast and squeezed it with the palm of her hand. The swollen veins loosened. The pain began to subside. She had drunk her gruel only at midday, suckled the child and laid him down. Yet it was oozing away already, as though she had gorged herself on a rich meal of rice and oil. If it had been like this for all the babies, how easy it would have been. The trouble she had had with the first boy! By the time he was four months old she had had to feed him a solid meal of rice. That was how she had pulled that floundering child ashore... It had been like that for the second, too. A girl. And yet, there had been no want of food or drink in the house.

Every ten days, gingelly oil and dried fish would arrive from her parents' house.

How much they've spent, buying things for us!

This little fellow... it was after he made his grand entrance into the world that their palms had forgotten the feel of money. However much one laboured there was never enough even for food. With two hungry children there had to be gruel in the pot

## Time Out

all the time. The shame of it...

It was only because they really needed the money that she had picked up her tender sprig of an infant and come here. For days none of them had had as much as a drop of oil for the scalp. At least one should be able to buy some coconut oil. No point getting angry with the husband for such a thing. What could the man do? He sets off at dawn, spade over his shoulder, and returns only at day's close. No particular kind of work, just anything he can get. Not even one day can he stay at home and rest his legs. That's the way it's turned out for him.

If she could get four or five days of continuous work it would be some kind of stopgap. For the few rupees she pays, this lady gives a whole lot of trouble. She won't let her move a bit this way or that! Never heard of such a thing anywhere--here in these parts or anywhere in the world. Why, the very first day she had said, "So, di, is that child in the cradle yours, Annaamalai? As if you'll do any work!"

After a couple of days when she wanted to go home before evening had set in, the lady grumbled, "Isn't it just as I said that day itself? Right in the beginning I should have got rid of you... All right, finish the rest of that row and then you can go."

How will that creature understand how things are? Once she's finished her midday meal, she sits down under the neem tree, stretches out her legs and dozes like a queen. Does a raven care about sharing work, or paying taxes?

All right. So that creature's like that. But what about these women working right by her side? Shouldn't they know better? All they can do is giggle

and gossip. Not one has the least worry about her own house and family. As though there are sacks bursting with grain heaped up in their houses! None of them speaks a word of support when she tries to leave for home in time. They actually scold her for it. "Why now? Might as well finish what's left," they say, beating time to the landlady's tune. As though they're the landlady's very prop and support! But is there no limit to the work done, the time spent? When it's too dark to see by, how can she say, "Go on, pull out those *murungai* weeds!" Why, those weeds have sprouted and just grown into a jungle in this field! Instead of all this drudgery now, she should have had the field properly ploughed without grudging five or ten rupees' wages. How can work be done for nothing?

Only after washing and wiping off all the *murungai* sap can she touch her baby and pick him up. How it pricks and stings! Shouldn't there be some light to see by at least to wash it off?

If she could only leave a little earlier, she could attend to supper and appease the little ones' hunger before they fell asleep. If not, they would all sleep off, huddling like chicks, each in a corner. To wake them up after that and to make them eat even an couple of morsels was a big job. And how could she eat without feeding them? That's no way to live--the gruel she drank wouldn't stick to her flesh, would it?

It wasn't as though these females didn't have infants in arms. They would all have left their babies with their own youngsters. And poor things, what could those children do? Could they stop the little babies from crying and crying? Could



artwork by h. h. isa

they stop the tiny bodies from drying out utterly? Only at the end of the day could this woman next to her go and put a stop to her baby's wails.

If only she could go home once in the afternoon, but no. That couldn't be. Going home in the afternoon makes a working woman lazy, it seems...

The sari-cradle in the thorn tree is still. The breeze has stopped, and the scattered clouds have darkened and come together to obscure the sun. It's like that sometimes in the month of Purattaasi. All the wind has to do is to whistle a bit, and a whole lot of rain comes pouring down, ruining a day of work and wages. Afterwards when the sky opens out, and flashing sunlight strikes, the blades of grain spread out like peacocks' tails, the raindrops tremble and roll down them, like stones coming loose from a nose-jewel.

Something tightened and

clutched at her chest. That and the sudden drop in the heat set off a furore within her. She gave a long, yearning sigh. Every one looked up, wondered aloud if it would rain. If it did, there wouldn't be a full day's wages. Just half.

The thought of rain worried her. There wasn't even a well-grown tree to huddle under. She must run and pick up the child, and untie the sari-cradle before it got wet. It was going to rain for sure.

At midday when she had picked him up and played with him for just a little while, the landlady had sharply ordered, "Ei, di, keep all that for when you're at home! You can sit back and stretch your legs and dandle him all you want then!"

That did something to her heart. "Why, amma, you won't let me sit down even for a little while!" she retorted.

"You can talk like that--what's it to you? The one who

has to shell out the money, note after note, she's the one who feels the pain, no? Can't you see, the women with you have all gone back to work?"

She had put the baby back in the cradle in a hurry, without rocking it, and had gone back into the field. The child's screams could be heard until she got across the irrigation ditch...

All that crying has tired out the child so much, he's still unable to wake up.

She moved on ahead. "Ei, Baagiyam, your baby isn't even six months old--how can you just leave him and be easy in your mind? At least once in the afternoon if you could feed him and be with him, it'd be better for the child."

Baagiyam shrugged. "Enough if I feed him a lump of gruel--he stays quiet. All the rest of the time I'm feeding him milk anyway."

A light breeze set in. Freed of

weeds, the transplanted paddy stalks waved easily, in broad arcs. Once again the clouds scattered and made way for the sunlight. The expanse of fields on the slopes of the canal-bank could be clearly discerned. She would tell Baagiyam to do her row as well, she thought. Then she could take her baby and go. But even if the transplanting went on without a break, it wouldn't satisfy the landlady. Not until she let fall a couple of curses, tossing her head to shake her gold earrings, would that heart of hers cool off. When she scolded, her otherwise full-featured, complacent face would suddenly lose all its good looks and appear much older. And the others would grumble and mutter, "As if she's the only one who's ever done such a wonderful thing--giving birth to a child!"

Again she felt an unbearable discomfort. Chee... she thought, despairingly. She rose with a jerk and went down the slope of the main ditch. There she crouched in the privacy of an *aadhaala* bush pretending to pass water, and uncovering her two breasts squirted out the milk till the pain stopped. Then she came back and joined the row.

Having woken up from her nap under the neem tree the landlady walked over and made a piercing remark, "Di, Annaamalai! You took so long you might as well have strolled into town to urinate!"

Bored silly with fieldwork, the women all laughed in one voice.

Vehemently she quelled them, "What's so great to laugh at? Laughing without any shame!"

Her eyes were wet.

Neram is a Tamil short story writer. V. Surya is a noted translator of Tamil fiction.

## Book Review

Kazi Anis Ahmed

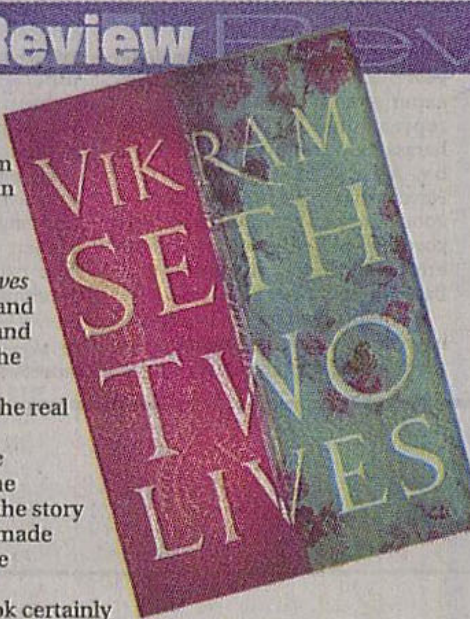
Two Lives (hb) by Vikram Seth, New Delhi: Penguin Books India; 2005; pp. 503; Rs 695.

Vikram Seth's *Two Lives* tells the story of Shanti and Henny, his great-uncle and great-aunt, with whom he lived as a newly-arrived student in London. Yet the real story of the "two lives" occurred well before the author's birth, during the Second World War. It is the story of two ordinary people made extraordinary by the dire exigencies of survival.

To an extent, this book certainly belongs to the category of writing that has come to be known as Holocaust literature. Several very obvious difficulties make it one of the most daunting categories of writing to venture into. Compared to most historical calamities, by now the Holocaust might be the most extensively recorded event. What can a writer say about it now that will be new? Should one attempt to tell another Holocaust story if it has nothing of conceptual or moral significance to add? These questions may be unanswerable, yet an engaged reading of this text should probably at least recognize these issues.

The book is divided into five parts, the very first of which deals with the author's first meeting with his future subjects, and the process by which he embarked on this project. It is in the second part that the story proper of Shanti, first of the two lives, begins. Shanti, like Seth later, left India as a young man to study in Europe. Though he spoke no German, he was accepted at a dental institute in Berlin and lived in a house owned by one Mrs. Caro, whose elder daughter Henny was initially against the arrangement: "Don't take the black man," she warned her mother.

Shanti's life as a student, then as an officer in the Allied Forces, and the first decade after decommissioning seems full of sudden crises, any one of which might have halted a less steely character. When



Shanti despaired of learning German on short notice, one terse line from his older brother--"put your backbone where your wishbone is"--seemed to be all the reminder he needed to find the necessary grit within himself. Thereafter, he faced--and overcame--every blow as if steeled by that one talismanic line from a revered brother.

During the Third Reich he was not allowed to pursue a career after graduation, so he migrated to England where the authorities refused to recognize his degree. Once he re-qualified himself, he was drafted as an officer in the British army, and went on to lose an arm in the Second World War. While he felt the anguish at such blows, he was never defeated, and overcame each crisis with courage and persistence. He not only learned to use his left arm, but also gained enough mastery over his artificial arm to start his own dental practice in London, where he lived out the rest of his mercifully less eventful life. The most significant event of this latter part of his life was his marriage to Henny.

When Shanti and Henny first met, Henny was engaged to another man. However, Henny came to regard this foreign boarder as a good friend. Indeed, when Henny fled to England to escape Nazi persecution, Shanti proved to be one of her principal sources of comfort through the uncertainties of war. Although he himself was away at war, he supported her with gifts and money, and most importantly with letters. The affectionate, and increasingly amorous, missives from the one person in her life who knew her from the wonderful days of her youth came to mean a great deal to Henny. Seth would discover years later from his aunt's letters that more than any great romantic passion it was this deep, warm glow of understanding that finally persuaded her to marry Shanti--eighteen years after they first met.

It may seem a little pallid to a casual observer, in this age of candied romances, that two lives brought together in war were tied more in friendship and understanding than in passion. Yet friendship in many ways emerges as the great theme of this book. Apart from the gritty determination, courage and persistence repeatedly showed by Shanti, and shared by Henny, what sustained them is the quality of their friendships with each other and other kindred souls.

Seth originally expected to be able to say little about his aunt, who was reticent in life, and had already passed away. A chance discovery of a trove of her letters, however, opened up aspects of Henny's life to him. What these letters reveal is the depth of feeling Henny had for her friends, and how the Holocaust, and each person's role in it, recast those ties. Henny withdrew her friendship

from people she felt had not at least sufficiently abhorred the Nazi crimes within their hearts. Yet a few people emerged as greater friends than she had previously recognized.

Friendship, that great ability of making kin out of strangers, weaves the two lives together. When Henny is failed by her own brother, fiancée, and friends--to say nothing of her countrymen--it is still other friends who save her. While Henny's circumstances are more tragic, this capacity for friendship is yet more remarkable in Shanti. Coming from a culture that relies so heavily on blood ties, Shanti ultimately makes a world of his own that is more defined by his friends than by literal family. This is probably the ultimate mark of his modernity and urbanity; and his final will, which so baffles the author, may also be a distorted extension of this same impulse of trusting forged ties over received ones.

Along with friendship, what else emerges here the value of normalcy. It may seem like a banal point, yet given the human craving for drama, it is also a point worthy of deliberate consideration. When the author's brother Shantam, a next generation immigrant, faces a kind of racism that Shanti never experienced, he becomes a combative radical. Yet Shanti reminds him that in the modern English liberal democracy, people had not been killed by the thousands by their neighbours for ideology or any other prejudice. It was a place where both he and his wife, fugitives of history, were finally able to find the peace and joy of living a "quiet middle-class life, without having it ripped apart by madmen."

Another small but remarkable moment that occurs in this book is in a slightly odd interlude in which the author tries to widen the lens to discuss the implications of the larger context of history. While his observations about the German nation are not strikingly novel, it is very remarkable that he nearly rejects the state of Israel as a morally acceptable consequence of the war. It is doubtful if there has ever been a book about the Holocaust that was utterly sympathetic to the victims of that great tragedy, and yet also condemns Israel as a solution.

Hopefully the book will not suffer too much controversy from this unusual and contrapuntal note, since it is almost a passing one. Besides, this book is less about the concatenations of history than about the quotidian marvels--bridge with friends, walks in the park--with which we survive history, and which alone matter.

Kazi Anis Ahmed is director of academic affairs at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh.

## BOOKNOTES

KHADEMUL ISLAM

*I Promise to be a Good Girl, God: Poems on Surviving Cancer* by Kamini Banga; New Delhi: Penguin Books; Rs. 150; pp. 97.

Kamini Banga writes at the outset that "these poems have been written over the last ten years as I struggled with surgery, chemotherapy, radiation and the aftermath of breast cancer." It places the burden of an easy empathy, of a not-too-questioning-acceptance on the reader. If art could be produced

only by immense suffering and pain, everything would be so much simpler!

In any event, the poems, made to carry a disproportionate weight in their stripped lines, are both affecting:

My cell has white walls  
Stripped bare  
In the harsh neon light

The small window  
Holds the promise of  
Tomorrow, but I feel  
The thick iron bars  
On my throat and  
A bit lower down,  
To the right...

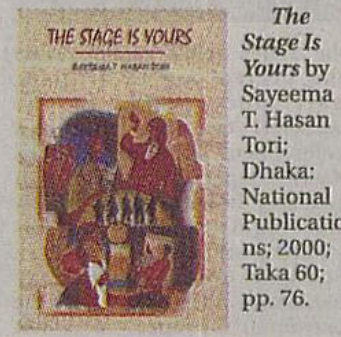
and affected:

Could I pickle my years  
And preserve them for a  
lifetime?

I could then at will  
Taste my bittersweet childhood  
The wild and crazy adolescence  
And all those adult years gone  
sour...

as they chart the progression of  
ten terribly mortal, terribly  
fearful years:

The lady on my right  
Is planning her first  
Meal back at home.  
The nurse invites herself.  
She will never make  
That meal though.

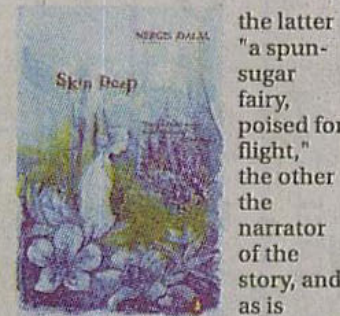


It was in *Six Seasons Review* no. 2, 2001, that Fakrul Alam noted Tori's first book *Ava* (1998) and wrote that though these are "stories written in adolescence for an adolescent audience," yet "someone who can write with such vividness and economy has a lot of promise." I came across Sayeema Tori's second book of stories quite by chance, and in two of her stories here, 'Azam Sar' and 'Professor Richard,' one very much a Dhaka story and the other a diary of an American encounter, she displays some bursts of that same promise.

I am aware that Sayeema does write the occasional short story, but that won't do: She must write more, and keep on writing.

*Skin Deep* by Nergis Dalal; Delhi: Penguin Books; 2005; pp. 301; Rs. 250.

A story about two daughters of an interracial marriage during the Raj, Naz and Yasmin,



the case in fiction, apparently not as striking but somewhat more likeable. Their father was a "very tall and handsome" Parsi (also "staunchly pro-British") who on a visit to London falls for, and vice versa, Sophie the Englishwoman. The plot's terrain involves Dehra Dun, Delhi and Hyderabad--mind now, the old, pukka Raj-era Hyderabad, when its nawab, "Osman Ali Khan...felt safer with the British in charge...and there was enough colour and pageantry to delight the hearts of the most pleasure-loving people."

And that sentence on page 3 sets the tone for the rest of the book. It is really not "about the complexities of human relationships," which is what the book's back cover says, but about the author's barely suppressed love affair with the Raj, with those wonderful days when there were twenty-one gun salutes, terraced cottages in Mussorie, lacy socks, pretty men and radiant, sunlit gardens--the rapt lushness that pervades the whole book made me feel as if I had been hit by a truck laden with flowers. I suppose there is a market for this kind of stuff, but, I have to wonder, where? Inside India? Outside it?

Now the good news: I learnt a new word. The characters here don't trim hedges and rose bushes with clippers, like ordinary folks/gardeners do--they do it with 'secateurs!' This is that kind of a book!

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

## A Contrapuntal Holocaust tale

"Oh my God! You didn't!"

"You just can't go ahead and..."

"I said that I can't do it..."

## Dhanmondi Neighbours

FAKR MOWLA

My ears prick up.  
Through the clear night  
crackle the words--  
at night is when  
I can hear, after  
laborers stop work  
for the day: pounding  
the lime-bricked house next door  
to dust for the six-storey cementblock.  
A quarrel  
In English!  
School's Out!  
The neighbor's daughter  
And son  
Home for vacations  
From American universities  
I saw them last week  
She thin, laseder  
Femdom in lycra black  
He parentally-doted  
In slacker mode  
And Pornqueens Work Long and Hard t-shirt.

I ease on to the verandah--  
'Ma, you have to tell her...'  
'Shut up!'  
Through gridlines of grille  
And thin-leaved branches  
I see kerosene lamps  
Licking the liquid edge  
Of Dhanmondi lake  
Where night fishermen  
Like storks  
Study ripples and sigh.

I fly back to the States the  
Day after  
To classes in New York  
To a dorm where also live  
Four other Bangoos like me  
Yelling in ragged Bangla  
About pizzas and stacked hotties  
Shouting 'khol shala!'  
At locked bathroom doors  
But right now  
With a smudged moon  
Above a creased Dhaka night  
And a sibling spat  
With nasally-slanted vowels  
I have to ask:  
Where am I?

## Elegy For My Sari

NUZHAT A. MANNAN

My *aanchal* grows  
Edgy all on a sudden  
The border quivers, flares up but  
It's too much to deal with...  
To choose between warnings and wardrobe  
So defiance defers, coils back tremulously  
Hiding crestfallen between anxious pleats:  
One fold taut with  
The gall of it all  
One fold crumpled hopelessly...  
My *aanchal* fidgets  
In one last desperate flutter  
A gregarious gesture  
Before it grows immobile  
Grim. Like a shroud.

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