



award

Literary Prizes : A French Speciality

by Jean-Marc Dupuich

NOVELS remain the important production of the century and the six most famous literary prizes (the Goncourt, Renaudot, Femina, Médicis, Interallié and Académie Française awards) recompense their authors. The members of the jury, who are co-opted, are permanent. The Goncourt prize is the oldest and most famous of the six. It was created in 1903, in accordance with the wishes expressed by Edmond de Goncourt in his will, in memory of his brother Jules. The prize goes to the best work of the imagination published in the year. The jury of ten members forms an academy which unlike the one founded by Richelieu (the Académie Française), accepts neither great lords nor politicians, but only men of letters. These conditions cause a polemic and the fact of belonging to one academy excludes the person from being a member of the other one.

The prize is awarded during a lunch given at the Drouant restaurant in Place Gaillon, a stone's throw from the (old) Opera. The "provisional allocation" of 5,000 francs, decided upon by Edmond de Goncourt has shrunk to a cheque for 50 francs, owing to the successive devaluations. But the Goncourt event means a big bookshop success and the author is guaranteed of there being more than 300,000 copies printed. "L'Amant" by Marguerite Duras, even sold 1,500,000 copies, in 1984, which is the year in which it received this award. It must be said that the author was not exactly unknown. However, in 1988,

France is famous for her wines and cheeses, but also for her literary prizes. Indeed, there are no fewer than 1,500, offering awards from a few dozen francs, accompanied by a guaranteed high level of circulation, to several hundred thousand francs. Every year, with the appearance of the autumn leaves come the names of the most highly considered winners of these distinctions.

Erik Orsenna, who is not so well-known still managed to sell nearly 800,000 copies of his "Exposition Coloniale".

In 1966, Marguerite Duras had confided to the *Nouvel Observateur* magazine that "The Goncourt is the last of prizes. It has not brought out a worthwhile book for 20 years". There had, however, been Simone de Beauvoir's "Les Mandarines" in 1954, and Julien Gracq's "Le Rivage des Syrtes", in 1951. The latter had refused the prize. But it is true that since it came into existence, the Goncourt prize has mainly awarded authors who were quickly forgotten, while it ignored others who were to become famous.

Although Proust received the award in 1919 for "A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs" and Malraux for "La Condition Humaine" (Man's Estate), many forgotten authors such as Peruchon and Mazeline were preferred to Céline, Gide, Cocteau, Aragon, Giono, Butor and Le Clezio. But can the ten jury members be held accountable to posterity for their choices? They managed to make up for it by, much later, including many great authors whom they had originally ignored, in their academy. The Goncourt award is a great media event which promotes books and enables a writer to become known to the public at large. It has been extended to the French-

speaking world with awards given to the Canadian Antonine Maillet, Tahar Ben Jalloun from Morocco, Patrick Chamoiseau from Martinique and Amin Maalouf from Lebanon.

It was in order to make up for the errors of the Goncourt award that, in 1926, journalists and critics founded the Theophraste-Renaudot prize, named after the creator of the *Gazette de France* (1586-1653). Thus "Voyage au bout de la Nuit" (Journey to the end of the night) by Céline or "Le procès-verbal" by Le Clezio, which had been rejected for the Goncourt prize, were awarded the Renaudot in compensation. The latter award is also interested in the French-speaking world and Yambo Ouologuem was the winner in 1968.

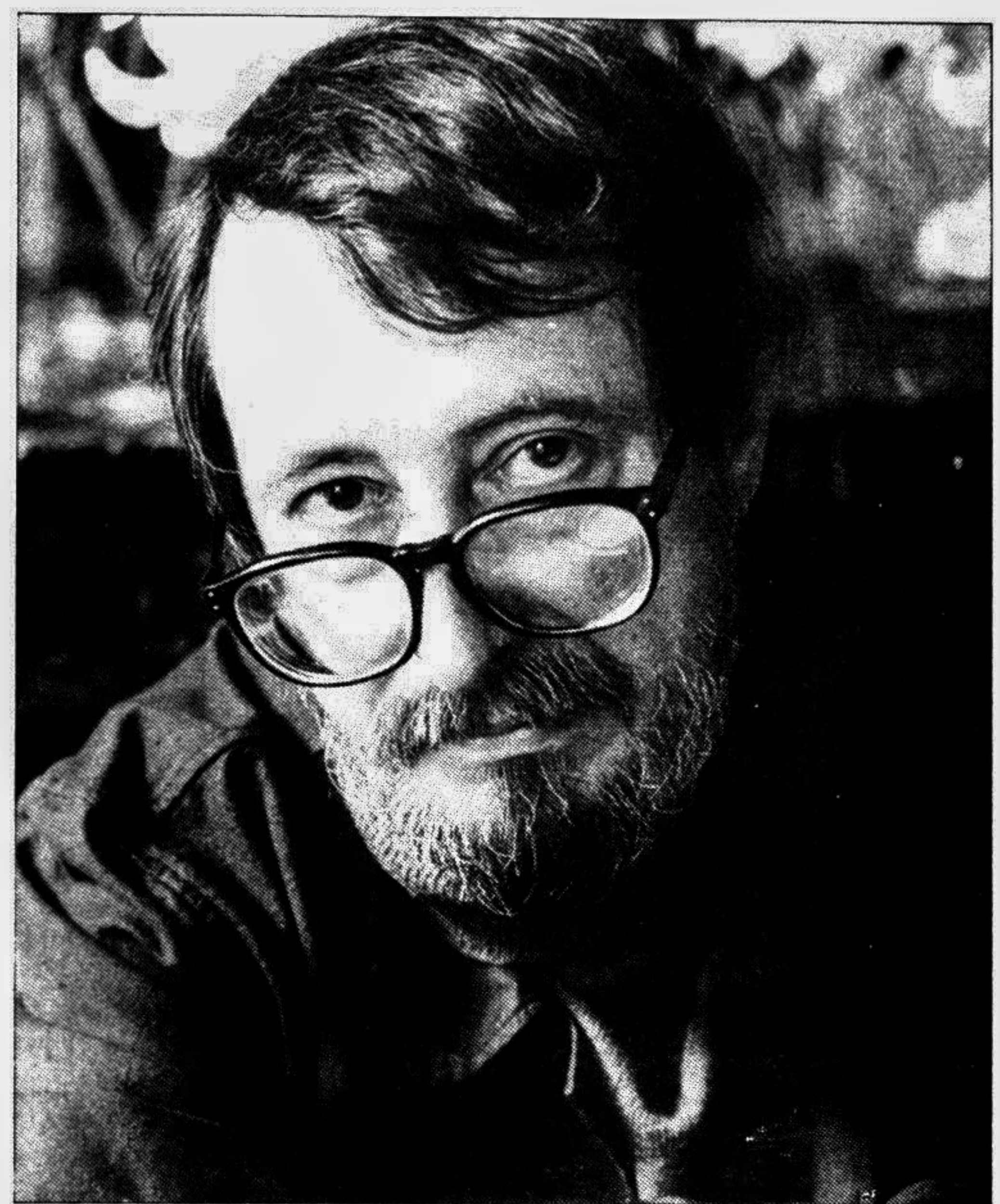
The Femina prize was created in 1940 in order to "reinforce relations of fellowship between women of letters". But, although the juries made up of women, the award can be given to writers of either sex. Award-holders include Romain Rolland, Joseph Delteil, Georges Bernanos and Saint-Exupéry together with Marguerite Yourcenar and Zoe Oldenbourg. One day in 1930, the journalists who were waiting for the result of the discussions being held in a neighbouring room, at the Interallié, club, decided that they would award a prize too and they immediately chose

Andre Malraux.

The Médicis prize which, until 1992, was awarded on the same day as the Femina prize, recompenses a work "whose tone or style contribute something new". It was created in 1958 and has honoured Philippe Solers, Claude Simon, Georges Perec, Helene Cixous and Christiane Rochefort. The Femina and Médicis awards are also given to a foreign novel which was translated in that year. The Académie Française's great literary award, which came into being in 1918, has been given to François Mauriac, Michel Tournier, Albert Cohen and Pierre-Jean Rémy.

These six big awards hold the limelight, but without putting other awards completely in the shade. The latter include the Grand Prix National des Lettres, the Prix de la Ville de Paris, the Prix des Libraires, the Prix des Maisons de la Presse, the Prix du Livre Inter (radio), the Prize awarded by readers of *Elle* magazine, the Poetry prize, the Marcel Proust prize, the Max Jacob prize, the Pleiade prize, the prize for a first novel, the prize for black humour, the prize for thrillers, the prize for agricultural, gastronomic and economic literature, the Giono prize, the French-speaking world prize, the Prix de la Liberte, the Louise-Labe prize, etc.

— L'Actualité En France



Patrick Rambaud, 1997 Goncourt winner

personality

It's Naguib Again

RENOWNED Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz first got into trouble by backing peace with Israel. Then the Nobel laureate was declared a heretic by Islamic radicals and was stabbed in an assassination attempt.

Now, at age 86, Mahfouz is creating an even bigger fuss, raising wrath both in Egypt and the Arab world with his criticism of an Arab icon, the late Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

In a new autobiography, Mahfouz declares Nasser was a dictator who brought Egypt social and economic disaster and — worse — failed to bring it

democracy.

Nasser's greatest triumph, the nationalization of the Suez Canal, was "a victory by... media and propaganda," Mahfouz wrote.

"On the military side, we were defeated" in the ensuing 1956 war when Britain, France and Israel invaded Egypt, he added. "On the political side, it was a great loss because it put Egypt in direct conflict with the superpowers."

The outspoken criticism has stirred up a storm, but also a debate.

Since the June publication of "Naguib Mahfouz, Pages from his Memoirs," Cairo Newspapers have almost daily printed diatribes against Mahfouz or praise for his revisionist views — and for his honesty.

His ideas have been debated in the

Arab world's most prominent newspaper, the London-based daily Al-Hayat, and on the popular Al-Jazeera television watched throughout the region.

Mahfouz's personal revelations brought shock, too. Publicly confessing to smoking hashish and having sex outside marriage is not expected of a man revered as the literary pharaoh of deeply Muslim Egypt.

Interestingly, the behavior is like that of the patriarch of an Old Cairo merchant family whose fortunes are chronicled in Mahfouz's most famous work, the three novels of his "Cairo Trilogy" published in 1956-57. In them, the father adheres to conservative Muslim social mores at home, but also drinks alcohol, smokes hashish and

goes to brothels.

But the harshest reaction has been to Mahfouz's judgement that the social and economic progress credited to Nasser is mere myth.

Critics say Mahfouz, a supporter of the liberal Wafd Party, is just settling scores because Nasser's ouster of the monarchy in 1952 also toppled a Wafd government and sent them party into political exile.

They also question why Mahfouz waited so long to denounce the Egyptian leader, who died in 1970.

"It has always been said Mahfouz was hypocritical towards the rulers and indeed the book reveals he was. The evidence is he did not say Nasser was a dictator until after his death," Egyptian novelist Sonallah Ibrahim wrote in a

Cairo weekly.

In his book, Mahfouz says he first had mixed feelings about Nasser's military coup that Egyptians call their 1952 revolution — "love and support" but also anger at the treatment of the Wafd.

Eventually he concluded that Wafd's downfall was but one sign of Nasser's "denial of democracy and ... unilateral rule" and that the leader's much-praised social policies were a disaster.

In a rare interview with a Western news organization, Mahfouz told The Associated Press that Nasser's promise of free education had churned out "graduates with a degree in ignorance" since Egypt didn't have the resources to teach millions of students.

The government's turning over of farms to peasants proved a catastrophe

that split Egypt's farmland into tiny, unprofitable plots and shattered its agricultural potential, Mahfouz said.

"We have this huge land and huge river yet we're unable to feed ourselves," he said, sitting at a coffee house along the Nile.

Despite the furor over his book, Mahfouz maintained he revealed nothing that most Egyptians did not already know.

"These were events which we all lived through, and whether they were right or wrong, they are now history from which we should learn," he said.

Mahfouz, who has written 34 novels and whose tales of life in Cairo's medieval lanes won the 1988 Nobel Prize in literature, is used to controversy.

— AP

poem

The Refugee

by Nuzhat Amin Mannan

I come from Gangaridhi, I think. Like an anklet of silver it clung to me and though I have walked far and wide Gangaridhi is still here with me.

I date myself from the Palas who lived in the 8th century, my tongue had roots in the old venerable languages, Sanskrit, Prakrit and Pali. The weaver wove, the silversmith and coppersmith tinkled and clanked and the steadiness of their skills and the poetry in their souls flew and settled in Sanskrit, into Prakrit and Pali. My tongue was conceived. The drones you think you can hear in me come from that time, from the Palas touching the Charjapada in their recitations, from the Palas who forgot the Gupta kings — one called the moon Gupta, the other called the sea Gupta; the Palas who forgot the dark reign, when the fishlets were swallowed by the bigger sea beings. My tongue became dark, salty, moist like a sea lying under a moonlit night.

I dissolved one dark moonless night. My Pala veins flinched, I felt so weak, so defenseless. I felt riders from the Deccans, from Karnat riding inside my bones, the Palas were supple like moonbeams, like candles softly, orangely, waxily liquefying inside Buddhist temples. I knelt in front, on my knees I chanted *Parom Maheswar, Parom Bhattarak Maharajadhira* — the Sen conqueror swept by on a tide of victory, with a cluster of titles. Melting and dissolving was what I performed till the breath I breathed became like an arrow's flight, not one that brought in death, but it was like unbroken suspension of an interrupted flight, one without any dying in it. Inside the secure and serene mud walls of Bikrampur, the sound of *Aarati* came drifting from afar over water, over *Arajali* petals, over indefinable clouds. The golden noons were frescoed with golden light and the lovely stillness of hours-that-conjure-out-of-nowhere. The winds are gone — a lovely damsel, too beautiful for her own good, too alone, too potent for her own good makes the golden, windless, the longing-filled noon fall asleep. I spied this from my hiding didn't I — I watched her steal away and I watched her love dangerously.

The Muslim Turk boots sunk in the mud, Bakhtiar Khilji saw the vanquished damsel — too beautiful, too unresisting, too strong to be a thing of pleasure. King Lakhan Sen, his books, his poets good Joydeb, the poet of hearts, the Sen hearts trusting and giving and ordering — evaporated like incense, escaping, aromatic, memory filled of something that had burnt out nicely.

I was become that image mapped in the mirror that I didn't know. I wailed with the wailers and plucked the golden-golden afternoon light and the lovely-lovely still hours and flattened them like petals inside my *Geeto Gobinda* — I felt I swam in the fragrance of old crushed things. I cried inconsolably — the dark rooms, my oil lamps, my mirror all had become someone else's something else's. I flicked to Sonargaon, South East of Bengal and I felt my tears, my tired tears tired of shedding, were beginning to gather dust. Hidden, veiled, banished in labyrinths of

rooms — I became a daughter among many daughters — daughters who were like night — a secret, for pleasure, for rest, for forgetting. I heard the pigeons coo and croon all day long — like the Durbar of Delhi and I. The Durbar of Delhi was like a dream-man, not one you have because you care, but the one you fight it out with in your dreams — the dream-man is fearful, strong, powerful, brutal — one that crushes you so that you never recover from the dream-man or his crush. Coerced to stay, coerced to lift my veil, coerced to meet the dream-man's eyes to let him see my disobedience. I grew big and I grew small. I lived and left place to place, connecting nothing I got with nothing I left behind. I had begun to understand that this did not mean so much, like the winds that blew, and like the rains that dropped I scattered over places and I moistened places — I planted myself in different-different groves, ploughing distant-distant moments, plating dim-dim roots.

I felt the spasms of Alauddin dying in the hands of Sultan Illias Shah, and Tughlak riddling. Sekander Shah and Sekander's son was... like oblivion that follows spasms. I had wanted to become insensitized to my home leaving, my being dragged outside my borders, my being drafted to territories whose names kept on changing, my being bowed before my rulers who were falling down and the others who were raising themselves out of the blue — but it all seemed like the fits I had and couldn't control — I felt convulsed, contorted, body mimicking soul.

Time evaporated. Moments too huge to fit in the cauldron of time, escaped. I was a visitor with mist in my eyes — I slouched to see the Turks, the Afghans, the Pathans and the Habshi slaves who arose before me like a thousand nights that were too lonely to be forgotten. Thousand nights and more to come, for the Moghuls came, destiny in their hands, in their foreheads, in any other part of the human body where providence is deemed to be written. Carnival came into the town-with-arches-and-stone partitions. The *shamiana* fluttered, Tansen made fire with music, the waterfront *mahals* glimmered. I have had fled past the sun light coloured tents they lived in — the romances 'homes' make us believe in! The tent was a tentative home, not a real sort of home — it was desert wind flapping and draping the Bedouin's heart. My tongue had a crevice in it — the Arabic and the Persian crept through the crevice. I coiled them, my many languages one lying over another, sleeping like guttural and smooth whispers, like spirals, inside the navel.

Bihar's Nayeb-e-Nazim Ali Bardi Khan was a taker. He waded. The sea was bleeding. The sea was teeming. White men were creeping inside the salt of the foam. The calm of that journeying could not be blown away. I had become transported to Murshidabad. There I watched the groves become soundless, din-less — like pictures of serenity, a landscape without any throbbing in it.

Like the painted dying — the dead looked like a picture stilled to life. The mango groves stifled in the heat of June and the heat of a battle that never started properly — sunset came oozing from mango tree barks and then began to congeal. I had seen trees like that a hundred years later. I moved, I let Fort William swallow me, there were drums rolling and walls from a sepahis' sunset as I slowly went invisible. Invisible — I was divisible — too. The damsel sank inside a cleavage — two provinces Bengal had now. A heart sat pumping and washing the clear-

ies of the two breasts — apart. Seven years: the divide mended but she only felt as a woman-with-one-breast feels: jittery, restless, only half of what her old self had been. The poor Memshahibs too were feeling jittery with their loneliness, their sighs, their fragility, their sacrifice. We forgot our queens and princesses and the awe they were due — the Memshahibs, white and right, like the empire got respect, no one sane could be despicable to Memshahibs.

My old tongue had yellowed partially and died in places — green sprouts began to shoot out too, the Memshahib's language grew on my tongue: I began to feel jittery, restless, half of what I had been — I began to feel like the memshahib's — jittery, lonely-like, fragile-like and sacrificed. I roamed Calcutta like a creature on a flight, whose flight had become its only home. Too many times bared of homes, having too often obstinate toe claws dug inside the soil dying, having too often pictures slip and fripper away letting the pictures become only memory minus the image — I had no homes, no claws, no images.

The world was pregnant with wars — I was just a woman-without. Empire's home was being razed so that real homes could be made. Those lovely, red, chanting, spinning dreams fixed to the wheel: I threw myself — a woman without — under the wheels feeling the gentle crush my bones got, the crush my songs got, the release I got when my blood escaped from wounds that hurt. I fell asleep at midnight. I kept falling out from one world in my sleep, I would be getting up in another in my dream. This world was castrated just for me — so that I wouldn't fear hurt or pain, divisions or lack anymore — yet I felt nothing of that kind.

I trickled to Pakistan, crying all the way, soaking my steps, washing away my footprints, soaking my identity papers, letting the letters fade away — puddles seeped from my eyes out of the back of time. Even the summer mornings were so cold, like a raven's beak — they were stone-cold, clean beak-like even though these had scavenged in the dirt. I took a blanket and covered my head — I thought if I could be un-seeable somehow something foreign could not touch me. I hid — but my shuddering gave me away — I couldn't stop quaking. I was awake, I was dazed, I was sleeping, eye was wide open. My tongue was pierced by Urdu, like tongs it squeezed my tongue hard.

I have moved since. My man had taken me to be a woman-without. Woman without name, or home or mind. He locked me in the home just because we had run away together to make a home. I saw trails of ants creeping in and out through the crack in the wall that held the shut, locked, barred door. Tribes of ants were gathering ant dust for ant homes, ant bodies were eating and dying in ant-like togetherness. I was free at last. I left through the doors he locked on me. Subservience — I left it behind like a coat I didn't want, like a skin I didn't belong in anymore. I passed from that not my home anymore, I passed through that not my name anymore, I passed to that making my mind become home for my skin. My hair floated with maps in them, my past was unparted from my possessions now, my forgettings were perched on my memories ancient and new, near and far away — I flew tumultuously into Bangladesh.

I have arrived — Gangaridhi — I'm back. I am broken into a thousand pieces, tattered and plastered, tattered and renovated. I have become steps, flights of uneven, uneasily lying steps descending into the waters — thousands of years old, from a thousand river eyes who don't know staying.