

SHORT STORY

ATTIA HOSAIN

After the dimness of the verandah, the bewildering brightness of the room made her stumble against the unseen doorstep. Her nervousness edged towards panic, and the darkness seemed a forsaken friend, but her husband was already steadying her into the room.

'My wife,' he said in English, and the alien sounds softened the awareness of this new relationship.

The smiling, tall woman came towards them with outstretched hands and she put her own limply into the other's firm grasp.

'How d'you do?' said the woman.

'How d'you do?' said the fat man beside her.

'I am very well, thank you,' she said in the low voice of an uncertain child repeating a lesson. Her shy glance avoided their eyes.

They turned to her husband, and in the warm current of their friendly ease she stood coldly self-conscious.

'I hope we are not too early,' her husband said.

'Of course not; the others are late. Do sit down.'

She sat on the edge of the big chair, her shoulders drooping, nervously pulling her sari over her head as the weight of its heavy gold embroidery pulled it back.

'What will you drink?' the fat man asked her.

'Nothing, thank you.' 'Cigarette?'

'No, thank you.'

Her husband and the tall woman were talking about her, she felt sure. Pinpoints of discomfort pricked her and she smiled to hide them.

The woman held a wineglass in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She wondered how it felt to hold a cigarette with such self-confidence; to flick the ash with such assurance. The woman had long nails, pointed and scarlet. She looked at her own unpainted, cut carefully shortwondering how anyone could eat, work, wash with those claws dipped in blood. She drew her sari over her hands, covering her rings and bracelets, noticing the other's bare wrists, like a widow's.

'Shy little thing, isn't she, but charming,' said the woman as if soothing a frightened child.

'She'll get over it soon. Give me time,' her husband laughed. She heard him and blushed, wishing to be left unobserved and grateful for the diversion when other guests came in.

She did not know whether she was meant to stand up when they were being introduced, and shifted uneasily in the chair, half rising; but her husband came and stood by her, and by the pressure of his hand on her shoulder she knew she must remain sitting.

She was glad when polite formality ended and they forgot her for their drinks, their cigarettes, their talk and laughter. She shrank into her chair, lonely in her strangeness yet dreading approach. She felt curious eyes on her and her

discomfort multiplied them. When anyone came and sat by her she smiled in cold defence, uncertainly seeking refuge in silence, and her brief answers crippled conversation. She found the bilingual patchwork distracting, and its pattern, familiar to others, with allusions and references unrelated to her own experiences, was distressingly obscure. Overheard light chatter appealing to her woman's mind brought no relief of understanding. Their different stresses made even talk of dress and appearance sound unfamiliar. She could not understand the importance of relating clothes to time and place and not just occasion; nor their preoccupation with limbs and bodies, which should be covered, and not face and features alone. They made problems about things she took for granted.

Her bright rich clothes and heavy jewelry oppressed her when she saw the simplicity of their clothes. She wished she had not dressed so, even if it was the custom, because no one seemed to care for customs, or even know them, and looked at her as if she were an object on display. Her discomfort changed to uneasy defiance, and she stared at the strange creatures around her. But her swift eyes slipped away in timid shyness if they met another's.

Her husband came at intervals that grew longer with a few gay words, or a friend to whom he proudly presented 'My wife'. She noticed the never-

empty glass in his hand, and the smell of his breath, and from shock and distress she turned to disgust and anger. It was wicked, it was sinful to drink, and she could not forgive him.

She could not make herself smile any more but no one noticed and their unconcern soured her anger. She did not want to be disturbed and was tired of the persistent 'Will you have drink?', 'What will you drink?', 'Sure you won't drink?' It seemed they objected to her not drinking, and she was confused by this reversal of values. She asked for a glass of orange juice and used it as protection, putting it to her lips when anyone came near.

They were eating now, helping themselves from the table by the wall. She did not want to leave her chair, and wondered if it was wrong and they would notice she was not eating. In her confusion she saw a girl coming towards her, carrying a small tray. She sat up stiffly and took the proffered plate with a smile.

'Do help yourself,' the girl said and bent forward. Her light sari slipped from her shoulder and the tight red silk blouse outlined each breast. She pulled her own sari closer round her, blushing. The girl, unaware, said, 'Try this sandwich, and the olives are good.'

She had never seen an olive before but did not want to admit it, and when she put it in her mouth she wanted to spit it out. When no one was looking, she slipped it under her chair, then felt sure someone had seen her

and would find it.

The room closed in on her with its noise and smoke. There was now the added harsh clamour of music from the radiogram. She watched, fascinated, the movement of the machine as it changed records; but she hated the shrieking and moaning and discordant noises it hurled at her. A girl walked up to it and started singing, swaying her hips. The bare flesh of her body showed through the thin net of her drapery below the high line of her short tight bodice.

She felt angry again. The disgusting, shameless hussies, bold and free with men, their clothes adorning nakedness, not hiding it, with their painted false mouths, that short hair that looked like a mad woman's whose hair was cropped to stop her pulling it out.

She fed her resentment with every possible fault her mind could seize on, and she tried to deny her lonely unhappiness with contempt and moral passion. These women who were her own kind, yet not so, were wicked, contemptible, grotesque mimics of the foreign ones among them for whom she felt no hatred because from them she expected nothing better.

She wanted to break those records, the noise which they called music.

A few couples began to dance when they had rolled aside the carpet. She felt a sick horror at the way the men held the women, at the closeness of their bodies, their vulgar



room, then the hard anger of his eyes as he left her without a word. He laughed more gaily when he joined the others, to drown that moment's silence, but it enclosed her in dreary emptiness.

She had been so sure of herself in her contempt and her anger, confident of the righteousness of her beliefs, deep-based on generations-old foundations. When she had seen them being attacked, in her mind they remained indestructible, and her anger had been a sign of faith; but now she saw her husband was one of the destroyers; and yet she knew that above all others was the belief that her life must be one with his. In confusion and despair she was surrounded by ruins.

She longed for the sanctuary of the walled home from which marriage had promised an adventurous escape. Each restricting rule became a guiding stone marking a safe path through unknown dangers.

The tall woman came and sat beside her and with affection put her hand on her head.

'Tired, child?' The compassion of her voice and eyes was unbearable.

She got up and ran to the verandah, put her head against a pillar and wet it with her tears.

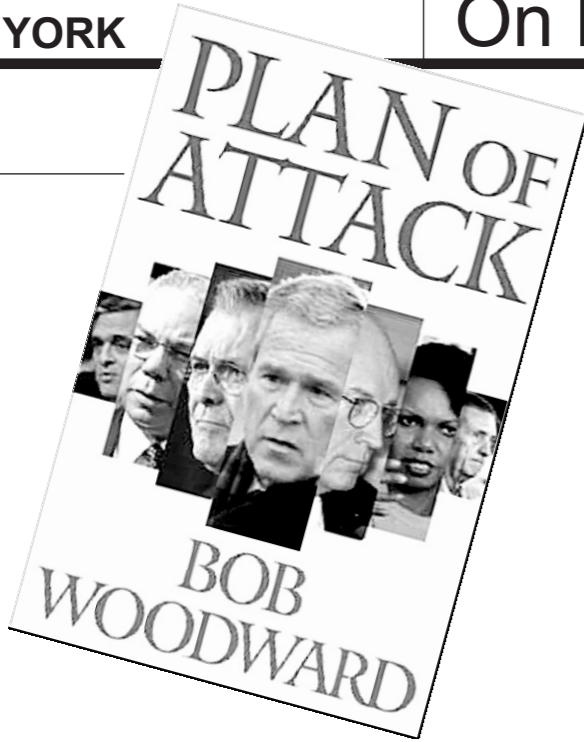
Attia Hosain, (1912-1998), is best known for her collection of short stories *Phoenix Fleed* and the novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column*.

Letter from NEW YORK

ANJUM NIAZ

Imagine Khaleda Zia or Pervez Musharraf—or indeed any other holder of the top post in Bangladesh, Pakistan, or India, for that matter—cozying up to a journalist! Make believe for a moment the prime minister or the president allowing a journalist complete access not only to sensitive dossiers on national security but also laying bare her/his heart over a 210-minute question/answer session! Add to all the above more hot stuff from interviews with 75 top government officials and insiders, and you begin to get an idea why Bob Woodward's book *Plan of Attack* was such a huge hit over the last two months—five million copies sold in one week alone.

How does Woodward get the top people in Washington D.C. to spill the beans? The technique apparently is the line 'get your story out first'—a deal offered by Woodward to the power players to tell their 'side' of the story before their adversaries do, and so come out on top in the political spin narratives. In return Bob pledges to tell the story exactly as given to him by the interviewees. It is a technique which preys upon political greed and ambition, and succeeds. "He is terrific. He's a great journalist. He's fantastic," gushed Condi Rice, the national security chief, before even reading the book. Where she is described by Bush as being "territorial... she's a woman." (Bush should know—Rice recently made a Freudian slip and called him "my husband..." but then quickly corrected herself).



On Bob and Bandar

Plan of Attack makes clear that the present occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue lied to his nation and the world about the invasion of Iraq. Bush and his team came to the White House with their minds made up about invading Iraq. Even before the inauguration, Cheney decided that "topic A" of the new president's first national security briefing should be Iraq. On Day 17 of the new administration, the "principals" met to discuss "... Iraq." As early as November 2001 Bush took Rumsfeld aside and asked him to prepare a war plan for Iraq. In September 2002, during a meeting about possible targets, General Tommy Franks told Bush the truth about the fabled Weapons of Mass Destruction: "Mr President, we've been looking for Scud missiles and other weapons of mass destruction for 10 years and haven't found any yet." The British also lied. The head of the CIA told British intelligence that Saddam's capability to launch rockets in 45 minutes as "shit". Yet the Brits claimed the opposite in their 'intelligence dossier,' subsequently used to justify the war.

To me the most fascinating parts concerned the long-time Saudi Arabian ambassador to the United States Prince Bandar—'Mr Smoothie' of Washington D.C. Prince Bandar, born to Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al-Sauda (currently the Saudi defence minister) and a concubine, lived as a pariah with his mother until he was eleven. "It taught me patience, and a defense mechanism, if you want, to not expect anything," he says of his father, who later brought him and his mother to live in the palace. Famous for vodka-and-gin bashes at his palatial home on the banks of Potomac, shared by his wife Princess Haifa, daughter of King Faisal, the royal couple lead a champagne life, courted by the gilded in Washington.

Bandar seems to have extraordinary access to Bush, coming and going to the Oval Office more or less at will. In contrast to very negative portrayals of the kingdom in American media, Saudi Arabia is shown to actually have a special relationship with the United States. Why? Woodward gives us an answer: "The Saudis hoped to fine-tune oil prices ... to prime the economy for 2004. What was key,

Bandar knew, were the economic conditions before a presidential election, not at the moment of the election." According to Bob's take, Bandar is rooting for Bush, planning to turn on the taps near the US elections sending the gas prices down and Bush's popularity up!

Yet, despite all this access and influence, in the book there is no evidence that Prince Bandar attempted to change American minds over the invasion, or that he protested to the top policymakers about the potential loss of innocent Iraqi lives. His loyalty is solely to the Saudi royal house, whose preservation alone seems to be of importance.

Prince Bandar is notified about plans to invade Iraq as early as January 2003, before either Powell or Blair. Bandar tried to downplay this fact to Woodward, who writes "For some reason, Bandar wants to fuff this up." The Saudi ambassador wakes up Woodward in the middle of the night to say "Wink, wink!" What's going on? Why did the Saudi ambassador play Wee Willie Winkie to the sleeping Woodward? "I think when you wake up somebody at midnight they might hear things or see things," said the prince, hinting that Woodward is hallucinating! Bob says Bandar's nocturnal phone call basically was to say that the writer was correct (that Bandar was informed before Blair or Powell) but his raffish 'wink, wink' implied that Bob should let the matter go.

Colin Powell and British Prime Minister Tony Blair are the two characters in the book who come off the weakest, with hardly any say or influence. Colin Powell, the least hawkish of Bush's top-level aides, was put "in the fridge," literally banned from the inner policymaking group on Iraq. Powell in turn tells Woodward about Cheney's "fever" to invade Iraq, the fact that Cheney was "terrified" that going to the United Nations would actually work and prevent war. Tony Blair, too, is a minor figure, not at all the major ally standing in the Rose Garden beside Bush. Apart from supporting Powell on the need to go to the UN, Woodward's account shows Blair as 'the poodle' being wined and dined in Washington, but not being listened to in any serious way.

In the final analysis, of course, nowhere in the book does Woodward directly touch upon the topic of the immense Israeli/Jewish hold on the White House. Which is why it seems that the real story behind the plan of attack remains to be told.

- Below are some nuggets. Enjoy.
- 1. Bush, at a Pentagon briefing in January 2001, scarfs down the peppermint on the table in front of him, then begins to eye Bill Cohen's treat, which the former defense secretary gladly relinquishes. Gen. Hugh Shelton, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, "noticed Bush eyeing his mint, so he passed it over."
 - 2. Aide Nick Calio declares his intention to "vitalize" congressional filibuster. Bush replies, "Nicky, what the f... are you talking about, 'vitalize'?"
 - 3. Vice President Dick Cheney dozing off during a security briefing.
 - 4. Secretary of State Colin Powell venting his anger at being left out of the loop: "What the hell! What are these guys thinking about? Can't you get these guys back in the box?"
 - 5. Gen. Tommy Franks telling his commanders, "This is @/# serious. You know, if you guys think this is not going to happen, you're wrong. You need to get off your ass" and using four-letter words at his joint chiefs, part of the Pentagon's machismo culture.
 - 6. Pentagon's undersecretary for policy saying "I have to deal with the @/# stupidest guy on the face of the earth almost every day!"
 - 7. Deputy Secretary of State Armitage worrying about Powell's media image because the "two are best friends, they talk on the phone so many times each day that aides think of them as teenagers joined at the hip, committed to sharing absolutely everything."
 - 8. Lynne Cheney, on a Middle-East trip lunching with an emir's wife. "When do the children here in Bahrain begin school? she asks. The emir's wife reminds the second lady that she's in Qatar."
 - 9. Powell revealing that he detests Rumsfeld's circuitous manner of speaking "One would think ..."; "Some would say ..."—which he dubs "third-person passive once removed."

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Book Review The Drunkenness of Things Being Various

KAISER HAQ

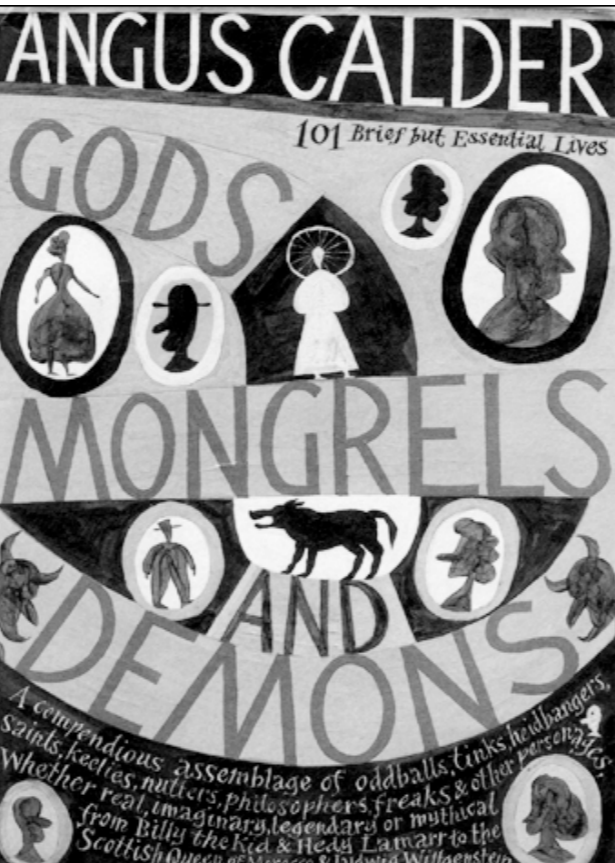
Gods, Mongrels and Demons: 101 Brief But Essential Lives, by Angus Calder. London: Bloomsbury. 16.99 pounds.

In last December's lists of eminent people's favourite books of the year this unusually titled tome was mentioned by Terry Eagleton and Bernard Crick. It is a remarkable compilation, at once entertaining and instructive, piquant and wise. It's also an inspired work, and the nature of the inspiration is evident in the four lines of resonant whimsy from Louis MacNeice that provide the epigraph:

World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
The drunkenness of things being various.

lot...whether we want to accept it or not, we are all mongrels." The term that rounds off the series is used in the sense of daemons, who inspire geniuses like Wittgenstein, the entry on whom centres on the famous poker with which he is supposed to have threatened Karl Popper.

Calder proclaims a "definite ethical purpose" behind his portraits "of oddballs, tinks, heidbangers, saints, keelies, nutters, philosophers, freaks and other personages, whether real, imaginary, legendary or mythical". His aim is "to help undermine notions of 'normality' which have contributed over the last couple of hundred years to appalling horrors." Since this might look like going over the top, Calder's elaboration is apropos. "The idea of a 'career' has been ideologically hegemonic in the west over that period," he claims. Careerism is now seen as normative, and its concomitant is denigration of the quirky, the whimsical, the outre, even though these may eventually be seen—generally after the death of the person manifesting them—as symptoms of genius. In its military manifestations careerism fosters war



("The military career requires war for fulfillment") and facilitates the development of ever more destructive weapons.

For a non-careerist and yet fulfilling and exciting life, Calder had his father as an exemplar. Son of Dundee jute workers, Peter Ritchie Calder became a resourceful Fleet Street journalist; science writer; UN emissary; professor of international relations at Edinburgh University, which awarded him an honorary MA to "make him legitimate", for he had no degree; life peer, as Lord Ritchie-Calder of Balmashannar; advisor on science to the Encyclopedia Britannica; co-founder of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Like father, like son: after studying at Cambridge (BA) and Sussex (D.Phil), Angus Calder reviewed books for the New Statesman, taught in several African universities and then in the Open University in Scotland, from where he took early retirement to lead a precarious existence as a full-time writer. As an undergraduate he had won a prestigious poetry prize, but then hardly wrote any more poems till a late flowering that has resulted in

four distinctive collections. *The People's War*, his populist account of the Second World War, is a classic of sorts, and the massive *Revolutionary Empire: the Rise of the English-Speaking Empires from the Fifteenth Century to the 1780s*, has been described by Edward Said as a 'gripping narrative.' There are a number of other books on history and literary criticism. A lifelong enthusiast for Third World writing, he co-edited the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* for some years.

Erudition combines with stylistic brio to make the present work on Calder's best to date. It opens with an irrepressible and truly subaltern character, Sheik Adam, sent from Bombay to the Mauritius as convict labour. He escaped numerous times and lived on robbery, ingeniously carried out by poisoning victims with *datura* infused into cakes; and was eventually transported to Van Diemen's Land, where he took the name John Adams to marry a Liverpoolian prostitute convicted of attempted murder. Among other subcontinentals in the book is Mirza Sheikh I'tesamuddin, of whom Calder came to know from *The Wonders of Vilayat* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press), my English version of the Mirza's 18th century travel memoir about Europe.

Who else is in the book? Just naming them would fill half a page, but anyone would find a number of well-known personages standing shoulder to shoulder with fascinating unknowns—under the egalitarianism of the alphabetical order. I can't comment on the scholarship in any extensive way but the absence in the entry and the bibliographical note on Billy the Kid of any mention of Borges' "The Disinterested Killer Bill Harrigan" is regrettable. The book in which it is to be found, "A Universal History of Infamy", also happens to be a classic of the genre of brief lives, which was introduced into English literature in the 17th century by John Aubrey and to which Calder's book is a delightful addition.

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