

## SHORT STORY

## The Owl

KHADEMUL ISLAM

This is May 1963, in the port city of Chittagong, in the then East Pakistan. It is the morning after the cyclone. I am twelve years old, standing on our front verandah of our house looking down at Momin Road. It is shockingly bright and calm, the roaring noise gone from my ears. A blue, blue, blue sky. Broken tree branches lie everywhere. On the road are buckled shop signs and mangled corrugated metal sheets. Where electric poles have snapped, thick wires hang down. The straggle line of shops facing us across the road is shuttered tight. Only the paanshop and Kadam Hotel, farther down the road near the bus stop between Ahmed's Laundry and Nice Bakery, have opened. A thin line of wood smoke issues from its roof into the scoured, rinsed air. Behind them is the mosque, its weather-beaten dome ash-white in the radiant, sparkling light.

Behind me my father is filing a report for the English-language news broadcast to the central radio station in Dhaka.

"B for bad," he shouts through the bad connection, "A for... for... apple, Y for yet..."

I know he is trying to spell out Bay of Bengal. The bay, across which Arab traders came in ancient times and which at times lent a briny, shrumpy tang to her night air, has dominated the news from here this past week. My father is an assistant news editor of Radio Pakistan. The ground floor of our house is his office, though it will cease operating once the construction of Chittagong's brand-new radio station is complete. We, my parents and I, live in the upstairs two rooms, with airy, sunlit verandahs fore and aft.

"S for salt, P for poisha, E for east..."

Speed. This too has been in the news.

The view from the back verandah is different. In the distance, a section of an upper-story wall of the spectacular mud house rearing up from the treetops like some giant Buddha statue has collapsed. Inside the room I can see drowned furniture floating in a pool of water: upturned cots, chairs, tables.

Trees have been stripped bare of leaves, branches webbed against the low skyline. The thatch roof of our neighbor's kitchen has been blown away. Mangoes litter their backyard. To my left is Majid's house, which, like ours, like most Chittagong middle-class homes, is a small and double-storied. Except ours is yellow. His is white. Both, like all brick buildings in the town, are peeling and streaked gray from the rain. The madhbari vine on their front verandah grille is in tatters.

The jackfruit tree in our backyard, too, looks forlorn, its fat fruit lying split at its feet.

After breakfast I lean over the railing at the back and see Majid standing on their front verandah with his father. I wave to him. He waves back. I tell my mother that I am going downstairs to our front yard.

"Don't go out into the street. Stay inside the gate," she warns me.

"All right," I reply, and then run downstairs, through my father's office and the tiny front hall with the maroon rexin sofa set, then skip down the steps to the gate. Outside its rain-rusted bars is the tea-colored rush of swollen gutters. Majid pokes his head over the dividing wall, eyes alight. We share a rickshaw to school in the mornings, bumping over pitted roads behind a tinkling bell, roads that narrowly dip and loop through genty curving hillsides so that riding a rickshaw on a sunny street you could look down to see an elephant dozing in the dappled sand of the roadside below.

"Ready?" he asks.

"Yes."

He clambers over the wall and says, "Let's go."

We open the gate, pick our way past the downed wires, then run across the empty road.

"Look," Majid exclaims on the other side, just as we are about to disappear into the lane between the pharmacy and the rickshaw repair shop. He had turned his head for a backward look. "It's Ram."

I turn my head too and see Ram waving to us from the second-story balcony of his parents' bedroom. His house is two doors down from us. Getting ready for school early in the morning, I hear his mother practicing her ragas.

"He wants to come too."

I hesitate. Ram is Hindu. But before I can say anything, quick as a hen scuttling across a yard, he disappears from the balcony, reappears at the side door of the eye clinic on the ground floor, fairly leaps down the stairs and runs over to us.

"Where are you two off to?"

"The mosque."

"Why?"

"You'll see. Come on."

We sprint up the sides of the lane, leaping weightlessly over outside puddles, water sprites skimming on air, whooping, almost slipping and falling yet leaping again. Behind the shops we turn right and race up the steps leading to the low boundary wall enclosing the open courtyard of the mosque. Three arched entrances lead into the prayer room. The accordion-style door in the middle is listing from its broken



artwork by rafiq

hinges. Inside, we see bent figures are sweeping the floor clear of standing water. The imam of the mosque and a teenage boy are in front of us, wispy figures stooped in the act of cleaning the debris from the exposed courtyard. Wet, black tree stumps and branches, masses of twigs, dark glossy leaves, bearded fern. Long grass, bits of glass, a broken water jar. Crow feathers and bird droppings. Sprigs of berries, tiny orange ones that yield glue for our kites.

"What do you want?" The mauvi, still bent, looks at us. He is surprisingly young.

We stare at him, tongue-tied, panting. We hadn't expected to run into him, frowningly at work.

"We came to see the owl," I venture a reply.

A sudden light dawns in his eyes. "Oh, the owl," he exclaims, straightening up. Behind him the teenage boy too straightens up to look at us.

"Yes."

"Yes, it's alive," the mauvi continues, fervently pressing both palms against his rail-thin chest. "Come in, you can see for yourselves."

And we do, flinging off our sandals before we enter the courtyard. "No, no, keep your sandals on. There is broken glass here." He pretends not to notice our half-pants.

And so we put on back our sandals and walk behind his loose, airy, blue cotton kurta to the broken door. Beneath my feet, the sodden leaves feel surprisingly springy, like pigeon breast or human cheek. The mauvi comes to a halt beneath the center door and points upward. We follow the bony forefinger to the ledge above, shielded by the roof's overhang, where chunks of cement had long ago flaked off to form a sizable hole lined with rotted planks and straw. And sure enough there in that darkened, cool nook much like the prayer room below is the big owl, alive and unharmed, ruffled and immensely puffed-up, true, but undimmed, his huge claws securely dug into the termite-eaten, pinholed wood, the round yellow eyes in his funny, flat, cocked head regarding our upturned faces with its customary pop-eyed stare. We stare back, filling up with a wordless wonder.

After a while the imam clears his throat. "All night," he confesses meekly to us, "I worried about him."

"So did I," Majid pipes up smartly. "I thought he would fly away and never come back."

I had feared the worst, but now in the brilliant light of this day the owl's feathers are a clean orange-yellow, flecked with dark, mirroring the irises of its tawny eyes.

"Al hamdulillah," intones the mauvi. We look at him. Then, unexpectedly, he raises his palms in prayer. Reflexively, our hands shoot up too. Beside me Ram also lifts his hand, though I know he has never been inside a mosque, that his mother will have a fit if she finds out, that they clasp palms together and bow their heads in puja instead before a rose-petal-strewn altar of kohled-eyed gods and goddesses inside their home. But I say nothing. And as the imam closes his eyes and murmurs the words, I look behind him at the shallow downglide beyond the courtyard's perimeter planing out to a field where wet, flattened grass gleams on reddish mud, at the tin roofs glinting in the distance, and in the sunny, singing air between here and there my twelve-year-old senses feel a deep watery tilt, like the slow glassy heave of the Karnaphuli that flows by Chittagong.

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## Letter from MUMBAI

MENKA SHIVDASANI

If you are an Indian writer in English, the chances are you were relieved to have seen the last of 2004. The year left behind many literary legacies, but only at the cost of the living presence of some of our greatest writers, starting with Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, then Arun Kolatkar and Mulk Raj Anand in just a few short months.

There was much to learn from all of them, even in occasional encounters; as a young journalist when I interviewed Mulk Raj Anand for an article on book publishing, for instance, I was struck by his thoroughness and attention to detail. To ensure that he was not misquoted in the article, he insisted on dictating his answers to me, right down to the last comma!

Towards the end of 2004, just when I had thought the year could hold no more tragedies, there had been further sad news. One day, I was reading Shama Futehally's reviews of four new books of poetry in that excellent not-so-little *The Little Magazine*; the next day, there was an obit in a leading newspaper by her good friend the author Githa Hariharan. Shama Futehally was active till the end; apparently, even through a long illness, she had been working on a novel reconstructing a cinema hall tragedy in New Delhi. Though she had put a great deal of work into it, it had remained only half done, according to her sister Zia Whitaker, quoted in another newspaper article. Her last complete work, the same article said, was a yet-to-be-published translation of 16 Urdu poems.

Then, on December 12, a leading Marathi poet in Mumbai, Niranjan Uzgar, left us as well. Niranjan, who was barely 56, had a zest for life that touched everyone he knew. He had big plans, and the enthusiasm and energy to carry them out. "I have done my time doing other things for a living," this mechanical engineer and unassuming winner of 12 literary awards once told me. "Now it is time to concentrate on poetry."

Uzgar had six poetry books of his own, a novel ('Giant Wheel'), and 13 books of translated works, among them a major publication, *Kavyaparu*, with Marathi translations of work by Indian writers in 21 languages.

Now, a fitting tribute would be to translate his own Marathi po-

etry into English and bring it to wider audiences.

Hopefully, 2005 will be a better year for Indian writers. As the legacies get richer, a new generation is making its presence felt; more spaces for contemporary writing are opening up and through the clutter of mass media and sound bytes, young writers are increasingly being heard.

A welcome development as the year came to a close was Mapin Publishing's new imprint, MapinLit. This Ahmedabad-based company has made a name for itself with books on Indian art and culture. Now, as Bipin Shah, partner, explains, MapinLit will be looking at fiction, poetry and biographies, among other things.

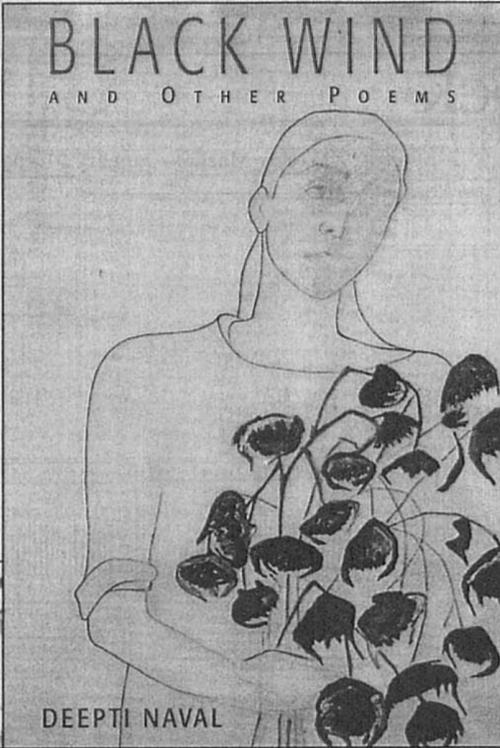
MapinLit's first venture is *Black Wind and Other Poems*, by the multi-faceted Deepti Naval. The book had a high-profile



launch on December 20, at the hands of writer-director Gulzar, who praised its honesty, and actor Naseeruddin Shah read some of the poems that evening, along with Deepti. The function was hosted by Mapin in association with The Corner Bookstore.

Deepti made her movie debut with *Ek Baar Phir* in 1980 and has gone on to act in 70 films. She is also a painter and photographer of some repute, and brought out a selection of poems, *Lamha-Lamha*, in Hindi in 1983. Now, in *Black Wind and Other Poems*, Deepti explores the world of the mentally disturbed. Working on a film script, Deepti had actually lived in the women's ward of a mental hospital, and it is from this experience that the poems emerge. The book is divided into two sections, 'Black Wind', about life in general, and 'The Silent Scream', about her experience with the women in the mental hospital.

The rise of glitzy new bookstores in Mumbai is opening up new spaces for creative writers. The Oxford Bookstore at Churchgate in south Mumbai, for example, offers a space for lit-



erary activities; it organizes regular readings and other events, and most recently, has tied up with Gopi Kottoor's Poetry Chain. Kottoor organizes informal poetry sessions at the bookstore once a month; anyone can get up and read, and the poems are then thrown open for discussion.

Gopi, who works with The Reserve Bank of India, started Poetry Chain in Kerala in 1997, conducting poetry meets and interactive poetry workshops once every quarter. Poetry Chain also publishes a quarterly poetry journal devoted to both established and new poetry enthusiasts, and there's a website, [www.gopikottoor.com](http://www.gopikottoor.com), which contains details on past Poetry Chain issues with pop ups of selections. If you have a poem to send, check it out; in a world where few people are looking out for poetry, he actually welcomes contributions.

The other piece of good news is that even ancient institutions are beginning to change with the times. The Asiatic Society of Bombay, which goes back to 1804, is often perceived, perhaps unfairly

personalities have been associated with the Asiatic Society. Viscount Valentia, whose journals of travels in the East published in 1809, was at the first meeting (it is a collector's item today), and several educationists and philanthropists like Sir Cowasji Jehangir and Bhau Daji Lad and Premchand Roychand have contributed to it in different ways.

Now, under its president, B G Deshmukh, the Asiatic Society is actively wooing a new generation. Between November 19 and 23, 2004, it celebrated its bicentenary with the Utsav Asiatika, comprising a whole smorgasbord of events: heritage walks, multimedia presentations, theatre workshops, plays, films. The imposing staircase of the Town Hall in which the Society is housed became an extra-special public venue in an otherwise commercial district. Here, events like Trisanga, an intermingling of poetry, music and drama in English, Urdu and Hindi was held, and on another day, a concert by Shubha Mudgal, with songs from Sufi-Bhakti traditions.

"We want to make this a space that people use more frequently," said Kamala Ganesh, convenor, Asiatika Committee, to me, on the day that the Society organized the Living Poetry session, with readings from the works of the three Indian English poets who had died in 2004:

Nissim Ezekiel, Arun Kolatkar and Dom Moraes. Ms Ganesh, and others like Vimal Shah, Savia Viegas and Usha Thakkar were among the members of the Asiatika Committee that had put together the Utsav.

"The Asiatic Society has not only been a library for scholars but also a public space for ordinary citizens for interaction and discussion on the great issues of the day," a brochure brought out by the Society said. "Utsav Asiatika seeks to recapture some part of this historic spirit, through modes reinvented for the times."

Let's hope the spirit continues into 2005 and beyond; in an increasingly disorienting world, our literary spaces have much to offer to a generation that does not always have time to listen.

Menka Shivdasani is an Indian English poet based in Mumbai. Her two books of poems are *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* (1990), and *Stet* (2003).

## Relatively Confused

RUMANA SIDDIQUE

My cousin's wedding day

I dress with care and dread

No matter how I look

I'll return with my ego in shreds.

Aunty A will be sure to say

"You look kind of fat today."

After a five-minute break

of as much as I can take

of holding in my tummy

I'll bump into aunty B

"Too much wandering in the sun?"

You look so dark today jaan.

No, maybe it's your saree colour,

Issh, you should have chosen another.

Enter wife of cousin number three-

"Why, you've slimmed down beautifully!"

Just as I'm happily settling to eat

Cousin la model will come and screech:

"What's this, unplucked eyebrows,

and such long blouse sleeves!

Smarten up Apa please!"

Cousin Romeo will smirk,

"She doesn't care about fashion, only work."

Cousin conscience-of-all will retort

"You people are so small.

She's simple in her tastes, that's all."

Dusky bhabi number two

will come to my rescue

and whisper sweetly

"Please don't mind your aunty B,

my mean shashuri.

You're not dark at all.

ujjal shamborno, that's what your colour

is rightly called."

After much more olfactory abuse

I'll return home confused

And make a pledge divine

The only other wedding I'll attend

Will be mine!



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