

SHORT STORY

CYRIL WONG

Ram Prasad Dubey had been working as a security guard at Springfield Haven Condominiums for the last ten years. He would always be on the ground-floor of Block 21 from mornings to late evenings. He would sit at the desk, glancing now and then at a black-and-white television which showed who was in the lift at any given time, or opening doors for whoever came in and out of the building. He sat at his desk, taking a break before the guard from the next shift arrived.

Nothing much ever happened on the job, which suited Ram just fine. He knew how to count his blessings. He had left Uttar Pradesh at the age of fourteen because his parents had become too poor to support the entire family, which consisted of two younger brothers beside himself. He had come to Singapore and had taken several odd jobs, teaching himself English with the help of other migrants from Uttar Pradesh already settled here. He landed a job selling insurance, which got him enough money to go back home for an arranged marriage to a young girl, Maya Devi, in the same hometown. After a humble ceremony, he brought his new wife to live in a three-room flat in Clementi. Later, he had found this job as a security guard, which required him to work only on certain days of the week. On the other days, he continued to sell insurance.

As he sat at the desk, Ram suddenly felt a draft of warm air, and realised someone had left wide-open the glass doors of the lobby. The air-conditioned air was escaping out into the humid evening. In India during this time, the weather would be blisteringly hot, a heat unlike the moistened warmth that clung to the Singaporean air. He went to the door, and closed it with a push of his palm. His mother had died during one such hot spell.

His father had died the year after that, as if he had lost the will to live after her death. Ram had returned to India for both their funerals; simple, slightly ceremonial affairs attended by several relatives. He had fond memories of his childhood: playing with the neighbouring children, the prayer-rituals every day, his mother's spicy, tongue-prickling cooking.

Ram could feel the air cooling around him and he snuggled deeper into his chair. Suddenly he saw two women walk into the lobby. Warm air followed them in; one of the women pulled the doors close behind her. She looked at him and smiled, her lips curling sensuously. She had curly hair tinted brown and loud, expressive eyes. He smiled back shyly. By her features, he guessed that she was Punjabi. On the whole, she was quite pretty, with large breasts which pushed out against her brown dress. Her friend was a Chinese woman—with much smaller breasts—with short-cropped hair, jeans and T-shirt. Her eyes were gentle and girlish. This one hardly gave him a glance. He felt like asking them which unit they were going to, but decided against it.

The two women entered the lift and Ram watched them on the screen at his desk as the lift door slid shut. Suddenly, the boyishly-dressed one leaned over to the other and kissed her full on the mouth. He half-expected her to struggle, but the Indian—he simply assumed she was Indian—woman embraced the Chinese woman and sustained the kiss between them. Ram felt as if he could watch them kiss forever. They must be relatively new tenants if they did not know there was a security camera in the lift. They arrived at their floor and broke apart, mouths falling open to silent laughter. Then they were gone. He stared at the empty lift in the screen for a long time afterwards. He had seen women kiss each other on the cheeks, but never on the mouth, never

The Kiss



artwork by apudha kanti das

with such mutual desire. Could a woman want another woman in that way? He knew men did such things with each other, and it revolted him to even begin imagining it.

He sat behind his desk mulling over what he had seen until the next guard, Aziz, arrived. Ram went to the restroom to change into normal clothes, then left with a wave to his colleague at the front guardhouse. As he waited at the bus stop, he thought about that kiss: the blurred, black-and-white image of those two women pressing their mouths against each other, then pulling away with laughter. There was a glow of desire between them which even the security camera had managed to capture. The bus came. He broke out of his reverie and raised his arm to wave it down.

Back home, Maya, his wife, was already preparing dinner. When she appeared at the kitchen entrance, he suddenly realised how much she had

aged since the day she had been introduced to him. Her eyes were similar to that Punjabi girl's eyes, but Maya was more petite, her lips less luscious. Now Maya looked like she had smaller eyes, and tiny grooves had accumulated in the skin under her eyes. Her breasts hung closer to her navel now under her loose nightdress. She looked at him and said in Bhojpuri, "You're back?" She would never call him by name, having been taught as a child that it was impolite. She paused for a moment, then said, 'Dinner will be ready soon.' Then she went back into the kitchen. He could smell the curry from the living room where he stood, watching her as she lifted a lid off a pot and peered inside.

Ram stripped off his clothes, but left on his *janeu*, a sacred string tied round his left shoulder to hang diagonally across his chest and rest on his right hip. It was a string put on him during a temple ceremony to signal a boy's entrance into a life of learning. His father had told him

never to take it off, not even when bathing, and he had heeded the command ever since. After the bath, he put on some fresh clothes and called out to her. Both of them went to the altar in the living room and sat on the floor. Maya positioned herself behind Ram, who sat closer to the colourful, framed pictures of Vishnu, Bholenath, and, of course Lakshmi, arranged upon the altar around the holy book, from which he now recited a few passages.

As the words slipped soothingly from his lips: "*Raghukul rit sadaa cheli aayi, pran jayay per vechen ne jayay,*" which refers to how one must never go back on his word, even at the cost of one's life—he could smell the shampoo scent of his wife's hair. Maya's hair used to be lovelier, more like silk; now it smelled of *Lux*. He finished his prayer and looked up, eyes instantly meeting Lakshmi's curvaceous torso flanked by her four arms, two holding flowers, one turned downwards to expose the palm from which a stream of

coins fell.

Maya went back to the kitchen. Watching the small of her back as she walked away, he remembered the women kissing, the Punjabi girl's figure. That's not fair, he told himself. That girl was so much younger than Maya. Maya was pretty once and some of that first attraction still lingered upon her face. Time would do that to anyone. But beauty was in a smile too. When was the last time Maya smiled as beautifully as the day she was first introduced to him? He briefly remembered that day. He had been pleasantly surprised by her shy, girlish grin, her bright eyes, and the pleasing shape of her youthful body under her *sari*.

It must have been that day at the doctor's office when she first found out she could not have children. Neither of them had remembered the exact words. It was written on some letter the nurse gave them. The letter was in a sealed envelope somewhere in the cupboard where they kept other important documents, such as birth certificates or monthly bills. He remembered how they had discussed the matter, but not for very long. It was surprising how easily they accepted that they would never have children. But something had stopped between them, like a clock that stopped ticking. She became more reserved, more stoic, but still patient and respectful. Before they had learnt the news, Maya had been full of delightful contradictions; she was demure, yet sparkling with energy, energy that showed through when she laughed. "Come eat now," said Maya almost indifferently, as she sat down at the table. Now, she was a grey cloud mutely bearing rain, lingering in the sky without releasing her burden onto the world. He sat at the table and silently ate her cooking.

As the curry filled his mouth with its warm flavour, he thought that on the whole, she was a perfect wife, except they did not make love anymore. He fondly remembered the first year of

their marriage, her smiling complacency and her affectionate glances at him. He realised he wanted to reveal the lift incident to her. He wanted to hear what she would have to say on the matter. Years ago, she would have cracked a joke about it. She did not laugh like that anymore. Did she blame herself for being infertile? He wondered. He suddenly felt sorry for her, but how could he tell her not to blame herself, that it was only nature's fault that she could not bear any children? So many years had passed when he had not said a thing to comfort her. He remembered what happened when they had entered their bedroom for the first time together after the medical check-up. He had touched her on the shoulder and she had shivered; she had reacted as if he was suddenly a stranger to her body, the body which had quietly betrayed her.

"Are you finished?" she asked. He had finished eating and had been staring at his plate. "Yes," he replied, and looked at her time-worn face. "I am going to bed early tonight. A little tired."

She nodded, and stood up to carry the plates back into the kitchen. For a moment, the black-and-white image of the two women kissing rose in his mind. His mother had told him long ago that Maya would make a wonderful wife to him. And she was. And how he missed her, he realised. He had thought Maya needed time to deal with her barrenness. How long had it been? Not months, but years had passed. She had dealt with it in her own way, but she also had not stopped being a dutiful, attentive wife. Yet, she was a wife who had lost her passion, her easy joy. Did she perhaps think that he had lost his joy of life too?

He stood up too and went to the bathroom to wash his hands. He stared at his face in the mirror. It was his father's face reflected back. It was a warm night. It had been his fault, he

realised, for tiptoeing around her, thinking she needed her own space. They had lapsed into a daily pattern which they had lived by for so many years now. Whose fault was it really that there was no more passion in their marriage? As he walked to the bed, he sensed the bedroom door opening behind him and the warmer air from the living room stealing into the darkness. He half-expected that slender Punjabi girl to appear at the doorway with a smile, and chided himself to put that occurrence out of his mind; what was the big deal with two women kissing anyway? It was Maya at the door, standing very still. She was looking at him. "Are you sure you are okay?" she asked. She was concerned. Maybe it was his after-dinner sleepiness, but she suddenly turned into his mother in the dark, her voice filling with concern, with love. She was Lakshmi, with her extra two hands tucked behind her back, and compassion shining from her eyes; he imagined Maya standing on a lotus. He felt like smiling at the image. Maya looked at him curiously and asked, "Is everything okay?"

"It's nothing," he replied. "I am okay. Finish the dishes, then come back to bed." She watched him for a second longer, looking surprised for a moment. He sat down on the bed and knew he would wait for her to finish, wait for her climb into bed beside him, at which point he would talk to her in whispers. Tell her about what had happened. Tell her about the kiss. He looked up and she was still there, looking at him with worry and something else he had not seen in a while; they held that gaze for a moment longer.

Cyril Wong is one of Singapore's leading writers/poets.

BookReview India's 2004 Cricket Tour of Pakistan: 'Basically, mate, my life is all about speed.'

KHADEMUL ISLAM

*Pundits From Pakistan: on tour with India 2003-04* by Rahul Bhattacharya; Picador India; 2005; pp. 344; Rs. 275.

As a boy growing up in cricket-mad Karachi, my first cricket book was Trevor Bailey's *Cricket Book* (with photos, the master sporting a hairstyle Englishmen affected between the interwar years) from which all the neighborhood boys learnt the forward defensive stroke. But over the years, my cricket reading never solidified, remained, like Habibul Bashar's batting, a thing of intermittent glory: Godfrey Evans's *Behind the Stumps*, Arlott on Trueman, Neville Cardus's *English Cricket*, one fantastic book on Wesley Hall and Learie Constantine, another on Jim Laker's 19 first-class dismissals (the titles escape me). Still later there were Alan Ross's fabulous *Through the Caribbean*, and that bible of cricket-loving postcolonials: CLR James's *Beyond The Boundary*, which I didn't quite grasp at first reading since it was more of a book-length meditation by a West Indian Marxist on West Indian independence, cricket, and English literature than a cricket book per se. Imran Khan's *All Round View*. Among the last few books have been Ramachandra Guha's absorbing *A Corner Of A Foreign Field: The Indian History of a British Sport* (which merits a separate review by itself), as well as his *Spin and Other Turns*, with a memorable turn on Erappali Prasanna, one of the 'holy trinity' whose other two deities were Bedi and Chandrashekar. Not much else—too many cricket books I looked at were glorified scrapbooks ghostwritten by hacks. Plus one eventually tires of whites writing about other whites. Where were our cricket books, our Arlots and Rosses?

Which is what prompted me to go to the Bangladesh 'book launching' in March at Et Cetera bookshop of Rahul Bhattacharya's *Pundits in Pakistan*. Rahul (surprisingly boyish) sat facing a small group consisting of a few sports journalists, a couple of other men, some bemused ladies, and male teens restlessly shifting on their haunches in the back seats. The question-answer session was dismal. There was no real contact between author and the journalists, with the latter, at a terrific disadvantage in not knowing English, not knowing what to ask, how to ask. It speaks volumes about their insularity, of a basic separation from English-language cricket literature that till today, as far as I know, this fine cricket book was not reviewed by any Bangladeshi sports journalist, on a sports page or otherwise, and that this review is forced to make its belated appearance on a literature page. The book sank without a trace. And so after five disconsolate minutes where Rahul mumbled gentle, polite replies to halting banalities, to everybody's relief tea was announced. I left soon after, not even buying the book, slightly embarrassed: What must he think of us?

But my itch remained: A book by an Indian on the Indian tour of Pakistan in 2004? An honest-to-goodness tour book? As Mark Marqusee had noted, the cricket tour book lately is a genre in decay. Like ODIs, cricket books are also slam-bam quickies. So a week later I went back to Et Cetera and picked it up.

*Pundits from Pakistan*, being a book about the Indian cricket team's 2004 tour of Pakistan, is automatically therefore also a book about India and Pakistan, about their fractured, fraught psyches and history.

This is easy to say, but Rahul's art lies in how he blended the two, in that the cricket itself, the passages about the game and the players, never stand glumly isolated, but are grounded in lucid context, in the people, cities, the land. Where on one Karachi afternoon an editorial writer for Dawn newspaper named Sonny tells Rahul 'his story from Partition. When the time came, his grandfather, an army canteen contractor, made preparations to move the family to Lahore from Sahranpur. They were to be transported with tier belongings in a military truck to the airfield. The driver was Sikh, born and raised in the house. Our of a foreboding, the grandmother warned her husband, who shushed her: 'Ghar ka larka hai' (He is one of us). The truck was ambushed, looted. The grandfather was slain. The grandmother's fingers were broken as rings were taken off them. The four children survived, but not the servants who thrown themselves on the children to protect them. The grandmother stayed behind, until the man was tried and hung.' Or of the 'elderly Indian sharing our vehicle till the Gadaffi (stadium) suddenly looked confused. "All this," he pointed around, "there was nothing here. It was jungle." He wiped a tear from his eye, and continued looking out the window in silence.' It is this context that makes the book compulsively readable. Each separate innings and almost every stroke seems to be pendulously freighted with this weight, resonantly hard-wired into this history, which is why the book reads so much more denser than it looks or feels, is so interlocking in its parts. Pakistan is covered exhaustively, No subject is seemingly left untouched, from martial law to the vagaries of Pakistan cricket politics, from the mysteries of reverse swing to vivid descriptions of Karachi, Peshawar and Lahore to the chilling military ceremonies at the Wagah Joint Check Post. To even about bouts of the tour journo's ennui, the loneliness of the long-distance reporter. Just about the only thing left unaccounted for is the number of moustaches in Pakistan.

And so the book teems with people. Not just the 'seething cauldron' of stadiums and the crowds in the streets, the acquaintances and fellow sports journalists Rahul meets and makes friends with and the Sindhi Hindu family of Danish Kaneria (Sindhi Hindus have been playing cricket in Karachi ever since the British Karachi Gymkhana back in the days of the Raj) but also the cricketing folksthe 'pundits' of the title—that Rahul (also stringing for *The Wisden Cricketer* and *The Guardian*), engages with. From Arif Abbas, ex-head of Pakistan Cricket Board through a host of others down to Andy Atkinson, the Englishman hired by Pakistan as pitch consultant and whose reflections on grassy wickets are a marvel to read. Cricket opens doors for Rahul, makes a normally taciturn people loquacious. For me, though, the man of the match award ought to go to Aqeeb Javed, former Pakistan Test cricketer and fast bowler, who is asked the question that smolders in every Indian cricketing fan's soul: '*How has Pakistan been able to produce the world's most feared fast bowlers for the past quarter century? (In India)...not a single express paceman. Whereas in Pakistan the impression was that you could reach out and, lo, in your grasp was a tearaway.'*

And Aqeeb's answer is worth reproducing at least in part here, not only because in its rawness is it funny as hell, but because it is something much more. In its utterly un-selfconscious utterance, in its volatile mix of belligerence, crudity and openness, in its tribal swagger and jagged edges, in its shock-proof words, an essential aspect of the rough-and-ready Pakistani national character is laid bare, revealing in its own way not only the Pakistani approach to cricket but its politics, sectarian violence, Kashmir, the Pakistani version of Islam, its army, its psychic grid and manners and mores, its gunrunners and its, to use an old Karachi alley slang, *faddaybaazi* (rough translation: street brawling). More than fifty years after independence this is a country still half-formed, with a still-molten center. As Rahul wonders: *How do they do it? How do they do it despite themselves?*

Very fast bowling, says Aqeeb, a Muslim, to Rahul, a Hindu, springs from four things, one of which is '...*eating habits, the diet. See, you can get protein from dal and eggs but that is incomplete protein. The aggression, you get that from beef. It's not that you need to have*

*beef only from cow. Here we use a lot of buffalo meat also. I believe that the red meat of these animals promotes aggression, and I think fast bowling is all about aggression. Your Srinath, his speed was 90 miles an hour, but he never created terror. His body language was so soft. My speed was less than his. But the pressure I could exert, because of my body language, was much more. Agarkar can bowl up to 140-145 kmph, but there is no aggression, no body language. Pathan, he has aggression, although he is not very fast. He may be eating beef. I'm telling you it makes a difference.'*

And what is aggression? '...(it) is an emotion, a feeling. And where do these feelings come from? They come from the mahoul, the atmosphere. From our childhood it has been drummed into us, "don't lose to India, don't lose to India..." What else, Aqeeb? 'Willpower: Fast bowling is for nut cases... Especially here, to run in and bowl in 50-degree heat you have to be a madman. You get hit, you don't perform, but you still have to try...Selectors have not selected me—aisi ki taisi, I'll come back. No wickets today, aisi ki taisi, I'll get them tomorrow...' Mashrafe Mortaza, put the slogan up on your wall: If not today, aisi ki taisi, then tomorrow I'll blast Trescottick's stumps out of the ground! Aisi ki taisi!

And so, it is no wonder that amid all the imitably-etched pen portraits of cricketers—Inzamam, Abdul Qadir, Sami, Ashish Nehra, Anil Kumble ('hitching his pants even higher...') Aftab Gul, Yaseer Hameed, the silky VVS Laxman, Sehwaq, the haughty Saurav (underlying whose brief talk with Rahul are whole subtexts why Indians dislike their most successful captain) the most unforgettable is of 'The Express,' aka Shoaib Akhtar: '...*caricatured endlessly, endlessly pleased to fulfil such caricatures. "Basically, mate," he has declared, running a wet finger through his hair as dozens of women lean out of his sports convertible, "my life is all about speed,"* and which then slides several pages later into a perfect diminuendo when Rahul surveys Shoaib's modest beginnings in Morgah, outside Rawalpindi: '*The sun had descended upon the fields and the last of the cricket matches for the day had finished. There was a certain poignancy to the picture before us. It reminded me of the sugarcane wastelands in Berbician Guyana, where the plantations housed bare pitches on which Rohan Kanhai and Basil Butcher and Joe Solomon and Alvin Kallicharan and others would lash their coconut fronds against cork projectiles encased in rags and twine. Port Mourant, the tiniest of sugarcane villages, produced seven Test cricketers. It was tempting to think that there were still a few Expresses to come out of Morgah.'*

So you tell me, reading it on a Dhaka kalboishaki day, this writing isn't as good as anything by Alan Ross?

The weakest part of the book is in the beginning, in Rahul's almost obligatory tussling (once more, unto the breach!) with that old nemesis of India-Pakistan cricket: the game as proxy war, of cricket-baiting and communalism, with Orwell's famous formulation of modern-day sports as 'war minus the shooting,' of the bigotry and hatred these matches could, and have in the past, unleash. His contention, that sport reveals the human condition by containing within it human aspiration as well as prejudice, that it can narrow the mind as well as broaden it is perhaps not wholly convincing: a specific disquiet remains. But the reader will go ahead and read, the fan will go to the matches, with the same hope with which Rahul decided to be '*pro tour...that the magnifying glass (of sport) would be able to show something, something...something basically good. How frozen could we remain by fear? Could we so easily stop playing? Could we so easily stop living?*

In the author's bio, it says that '*Rahul Bhattacharya...was a part of a St. Xavier's College team that comfortably failed to carry forward the legacy of Gavaskar and Ashok Mankad.*' He should rest assured that he has indeed carried forward their legacy, albeit in a different métier and medium, but no less honorably.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Today is Paru's Marriage

AMRITYA SHAHA (translated by Farhad Ahmed)

Today is Paru's marriage sorrow at the youngmen's club traffic jam, on every corner the desolate cry: can it be true? Today of all the days for Paru to choose to disappear spatula in hand into the heat of the stove's flame, forever?

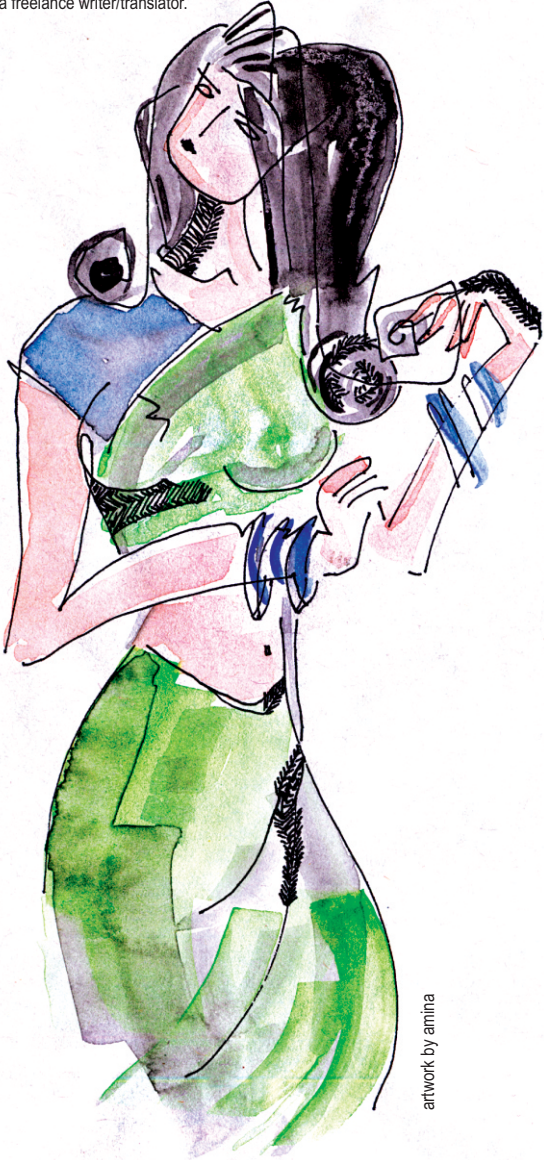
The city's youth, to whom are they going to at least once declare: I love you for whom would they buy tattooed t-shirts, for whom burn their lips with cigarette toxins, Paru For whom for whom, Paru, for whom these flowers to toss?

After eleven years, today, the city lights flickered out, Paru

the old chessmaster's move foiled because of you Paru, every youth poison in hand inside the clubhouse. Tell me, are you off? Greedy for the garland your lovely neck to extend?

Better come here instead, see how this grief will wreck your marriage today, how it'll smash it to smithereens.

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