

SHORT STORY

On the Side of the Enemy*

ZAKIR TALUKDAR
(Translated by Khademul Islam)

"I sold the grain to build the shithouse. Now what do I eat in order to shit?"

Laughter spread throughout the whole shop. Even Jabbar, at whom the line had been directed, joined in.

Jabbar was a rickshaw-van driver. A rental van, deposit thirty Takas. After paying the van owner whatever was left was stretched to keep body and soul together. If one owned the van then one did not have to hand over the money earned by the sweat of one's arse. Jabbar's wife had taken out a loan from BRAC and handed over to him three thousand taka. But Jabbar, instead of buying a rickshaw van, had built himself an easy-room on stilts on the bit of land by his house next to the embankment. To lie down on the room's adjoining little verandah and play the flute felt very nice indeed! But in this neighbourhood building a machan room to lie down in instead of buying a van rickshaw was equivalent to selling one's crop to build a shithouse. With so much scrub and bushes around what was the need to waste money and space in building a place to shit?

The news had reached Sobhan Mollah's ears. He was the former chairman of the union parishad. Election season was near, and he was going to run again. Election strategy dictated that he keep abreast of what was going on in his constituency. Therefore he was not unaware of the fact of Jabbar's leisure room.

Listening to the words one might think it to be a rebuke, but the tone was indulgent. So even Jabbar had not hesitated to break into laughter, exposing his shovel-like teeth.

"So is that room of yours simply to enjoy the breeze, or is there provision for some *paan*-cigarette smoking too?"

"If all of you one day honour it with the dust of your feet," Jabbar replied, "there will be provision for everything."

"If there's some *paan* and cigarettes, why, we'll visit at least once every day. What say you fellows, eh?"

The question had been directed towards his hangers-on. All of them, including others in the shop, vigorously nodded their heads in approval. One them proposed that Jabbar arrange a *milad* in his leisure room: "We'll bless it."

This proposal was eagerly seconded by Sobhan's Mollah's associates. A *milad* meant a small gathering, which would lead to good results in elections.

Jabbar however, hesitated. Sobhan Molla guessed at its cause. He told Jabbar, "Don't you worry about the cost. You arrange your room for people to sit down, and I'll provide the sweetmeats."

Immediately joyous sounds rushed out of the shop to mingle with the outside air.

Then, from the far corner of the shop a question came floating, "*Milad* for what, Sobhan Mollah? For your funeral?"

The voice was measured, with not even the slightest hint of a threat. Yet instantly the festive air inside the shop vanished. The



artwork by subyashchi nazra

question hung in the air for some time. Sobhan Mollah, his three companions, the customers in the shop, all of them wordlessly turned their heads towards the dark corner.

One from Sobhan Mollah's group blustered, "Who are you? Who the hell are you to say such things?"

The previous speaker then stood up. His shadow on the wall behind him lengthened. That shadow then gave a small, mirthless laugh, more like a snake hissing. All the people seated inside the shop stared fixedly at it as if hypnotized. The shadow said, "All of you will know who I am later. But Sobhan Mollah, you, who are you?"

"You are a murderer."

The words came from the other side of the room.

All of them turned their heads to stare in the other direction.

Somebody else too had stood up.

Then three more figures came up to the store's door.

"Sobhan Mollah, you are a grain thief!"

"You are a class enemy!"

"You are a bloodsucker!"

"You are an enemy of the people!"

The five of them carefully threaded their way between the huddled bodies of the men sitting there and encircled Sobhan Mollah.

Sobhan Mollah seemed glued to the bench. His bloodless face was visible even in the weak light. His voice rattled in his dry throat: "You, you..."

"You are right. We are *Sarbahara*."

Then the man stabbed him in the heart with a long-bladed knife.

Blood when it spurts does not obey any laws. Faces were spattered by sticky, live tissue. The five of them raised their hands. The veins in their necks stood out as they shouted: "Enemies of the people will die."

And though they were full-throated slogans, yet no echoing cries rose.

2.

The river lay on one side of the house beyond the sandbars, while on the other was almost a mile of rice fields. On yet another side were rows of dwellings similar to this one. In all these one-roomed homes lived their supporters and sympathizers. If trouble were to present itself from any direction, they would be aware of it far in advance.

The room had one raised bamboo cot, for both sleeping and sitting. Currently sitting there and eating rice off a flaked-tin plate was a man almost past middle age. His hair was disheveled, and white as catkins. An inch-long stubble, which too was white. He was eating the rice with lip-slurping relish; coarse-grained Irri rice, cooked red spinach and plant-stem curry. After finishing his meal he luxuriously lit a cigarette. With every inhalation the man coughed a little and a soft rattle could be heard from within his chest, but he didn't seem to care—he kept smoking the cigarette with that air of utmost enjoyment.

Four men entered the room, ranging in ages from youth to middle age. They looked at him with eyes full of respect. A very brief exchange of greetings followed. The newly-arrived men addressed him with great deference. Which was as it should be. Ssince that man was Comrade Mujibul Haq, a legend among underground revolutionaries. Someone who had given his entire life to the cause of organizing revolutionary movements on behalf of the working masses. He was a constant threat to those running the state. A bounty has been declared on his head. Though he had spent

much of his life underground he had never once been caught.

Even at this age he could not sleep in the same bed two nights in a row. His asthma sometimes got the better of him, and when one saw him writhing for a little air nobody would believe that this was the legendary revolutionary. It was only his indomitable spirit that time and again brought him back from death's door.

Today for this meeting he had walked on foot for six kilometers. Nowadays his body no longer had the strength of a tiger. When he walked for ten minutes at a stretch he could hear his heart pound. Yet he had come. The first reason was that this meeting was very important; the second was that he never posted a meeting and failed to turn up.

The other four were extremely important members of the party. Their names were also fearsome to the police, to the enemies of the class struggle. Especially the youngest one, Comrade Jamshed, head of the party's armed wing.

Comrade Mujibul Haq spoke haltingly, yet his voice carried authority. He began by saying, "All of you know the agenda of today's meeting. Comrades, you know that after the founding of our party we have had to withstand multiple assaults. All such attacks we revolutionaries are ready to meet and confront. But now we are faced with an attack which we had never even thought of. That is the attack on our party's image."

Mujibul Haq paused. Everybody sat with their heads down. Then his voice exploded, "Our party is now being called by the people as the party of dacoits, of murderers for hire."

One of them protested, "Comrade, that is the disinformation spread by the bourgeoisie media."

"I am sorry to inform you that it is not just

the bourgeoisie media that is saying such things. Ordinary people are saying them too."

"We should protest it then."

"Protest? One can counter misinformation and lies. How does one counter the truth?"

Silence again descended for a while in the room.

Mujibul Haq spoke again, "Being underground does not mean living in a hole beneath the earth. Underground means to melt invisibly with the masses, to be like a fish in the water. Those of us who have sworn to revolution, the people will shelter them."

"That they're doing, comrade."

"Yes, but not of their own free will. I have been informed that some of our units are taking grain from peasants by force, taking money too. What do you say to that?"

"Some isolated incidents have taken place."

"And this matter of acting as hired assassins in the name of eliminating class enemies? I'm even hearing that in some areas our men are ruling party cadres by day and revolutionaries by night."

Jamshed now opened his mouth,

"Comrade, in some areas it has become impossible to operate without the shelter afforded by those in power."

"Those in power?" Meaning that you have lost faith in the power of the masses? That there is no faith in the power of one's ideology? Those in positions of state power are our sworn enemies."

The meeting had started at noon. Discussion and arguments went on till everybody became aware that they no longer could make out each other's faces. At around 10:30 pm Mujibul Haq stood up. He cautioned, "Be careful about new recruits to the party. A lot of listed criminals have fled from their own areas and want to take shelter within the party. We have to identify these elements and rid us of them. Otherwise we'll not survive."

He bade them goodbye and started to walk towards the river where a trusty comrade waited for him with a boat. The village was swathed in darkness. He arrived by the riverbank and waited. There was one spot over the waters where the darkness seemed to be particularly dense.. That was where the boat lay.

"Are you there, Srikonho?"

In reply a torchlight shone on his face, its beam blinding him. He became aware that Srikonho was not alone; there were four others with him. He started to say something, but a strong hand from behind caught his neck in a stranglehold. A strong, sharp blade entered his chest. Even amid the great pain, he thought it has somebody among the five! Nobody else knew about this meeting. Then he fell down. A thirty-year legend met his end in total silence!

3.

After getting the signal from the torchlight Jamshed brought the boat to rest against the riverbank . Finally, he thought, the old fool was dead!

Jamshed's companions were now the

party's most intrepid and armed wing. Money too they had plenty in their pockets.

Government officials sought to give them protection. The more protection they gave, the closer they would nestle in their breast, and the more they would suck their blood.

Jamshed laughed a cruel laugh in the dark. Beyond the palm trees he could hear his companions walking towards him.

The rainy season was over, yet the water slapped and licked noisily at the sandbanks. The boat rocked on coming to rest against land. He lit a cigarette, covering the match flame with a cupped palm. All around him was darkness. It was almost two in the morning.

Anwar Chairman had hired them to kill Sobhan Molla. Today Sobhan Molla's brother Khaleque Molla was to give them money to kill Anwar Chairman. Jamshed's four associates had gone to collect the advance payment from Khaleque Molla. It had been arranged that they would meet him here with the money. As his companions neared Jamshed blew out a lungful of smoke.

"Did you get the money?"

One of them answered, "Yes."

"How much?"

"Half. The rest on completion of the job."

"How much is what I wanted to know."

"One lakh."

"One lakh?" Jamshed furrowed his eyebrows. One lakh was the whole payment. Advance payment was supposed to be fifty thousand.

"One lakh? Why did Khaleque Molla give us that much?"

"It's not one hit, but two."

"Oh." The riddle having been solved, Jamshed blew out another lungful of smoke. "Who's the other one?"

His companions did not answer his question.

"Do you know the hit?"

"Yes."

"Who is it?"

Again, there was no answer.

Jamshed now was very annoyed, "What's going on? Why don't answer me?"

In the darkness he strained to look at them. It was then that he felt that they were no longer standing beside him. The four of them had neatly encircled him. He stared at them. What was going on? Suddenly he got his answer. He knew who the second hit was. He grabbed for the gun at his waist. But the net had grown tight around him, very tight indeed. All of them stabbed and swung at Jamshed's body with axes and knives.

A little later they saw by the light of the torch that Jamshed's body was now a heap of bloody meat. Then out of habit they cried out: "Death to class enemies, death to them all!"

But everybody in the faraway village was fast asleep--and so nobody echoed their slogans. Perhaps a few shifted uneasily in their sleep and turned over on their sides.

(Zakir Talukdar is a Bangladeshi writer. Khademul Islam is literary editor, *The Daily Star*.)
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Book Reviews

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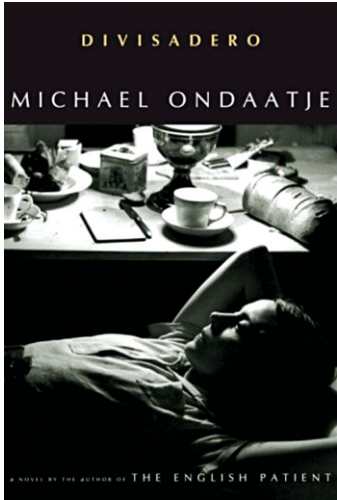
The past always comes back

FARAH AMEEN

Divisadero by Michael Ondaatje; New York: Alfred A. Knopf; 2007; \$25

"... 'We have art,' Nietzsche said, 'so we shall not be destroyed by the truth.' The raw truth of an incident never ends, and the story of Coop and the terrain of my sister's life are endless to me. They are the sudden possibility every time I pick up the telephone when it rings some late hour after midnight, and I wait for his voice, or the deep breath before Claire will announce herself. For I have taken myself away from who I was with them, and what I used to be. When my name was Anna."

Thus begins *Divisadero*, Michael Ondaatje's latest novel: an intricate tale of love, longing, betrayal, violence, loss -- and, above all, the repercussions of a single event on a family's future. It opens in the 1970s near Gold Rush country in northern California, weaves through the casinos of Nevada and then moves on to south-central France, several decades earlier. Sprinkled with evocative imagery, this is a quiet story of interconnected lives that spans years, even centuries. Anna and Claire, born within a week of each other, are sisters from the day they're brought home from the hospital. Both their mothers died in childbirth, and Anna's father decided to adopt Claire: "The dead mother of the other child had no relatives . . . perhaps that was how he was able to do this. It was a field hospital on the outskirts of Santa Rosa, and to put it



brutally, they owed him a wife, they owed him something."

The girls grow up almost like twins, working the land beside their father and Coop, a neighbor's son. Coop had been taken in after witnessing his own family's violent death at age 4. In exchange for his new life, Coop helps with the farm and acts as the girls' quasi-brother. Their life is spare, quiet, uneventful: "Most mornings we used to come into the dark kitchen and silently cut thick slices of cheese for ourselves. My father drinks a cup of wine.... A father, his two eleven-year-old daughters, and Coop, the hired hand, a few years older than us. No one has talked yet, there's just been the noise of pails or gates swinging open.... Coop was an open soul in those days. We realized his taciturn manner was not a wish for separateness but a tentativeness about words. He was adept in the physical world where he protected us. But in the world of language he was our student."

Even the calmest existence

needs a shake-up, and the case is no different for this makeshift family. As teenagers, Anna and Claire still share a tight bond, until they start diverging and growing into their own. They "reflected each other, competed with each other." Claire is happiest on her horse, riding the wilderness. Anna's world involves Coop. What begins as innocent visits to his cabin changes one rainy day, developing into an angst-ridden affair. Overwhelmed by new experiences, she keeps them close to her chest. They "remained mysterious to each other," the author says in retrospect. "They'd really been discovering themselves. In this way they could fit into the world."

It turns out that Claire has always known their secret: "She had lived in mid-air all those weeks. She'd witnessed Anna returning, sometimes as late as dusk, to the farmhouse, wild-eyed, her face holding nothing back, full of certainties and knowledge, scared of everything. . . ."

Then, on a stormy day, everything changes. Anna's father discovers the truth about Coop and his daughter. Enraged, he drags her away, but not before dealing with the farmhand's betrayal. Hours later, Claire finds the broken, beat-up Coop--and realizes that both he and her sister are lost to her forever.

As Ondaatje's narrative continues through the casinos of Nevada to France, the consequences of the past haunt his characters every step of the way. Somehow, running away makes no difference; they seem to seek similar lives wherever

they go.

To escape her demons, the adult Anna reinvents herself, crossing continents to go to southern France, where she delves into the life of a once-famous French writer, Lucien Segura. But, mirroring her past, she has just moved from her father's farm to Segura's farm in France, the last place he lived. She meets Rafael, a man who, like Coop, lives off the land, playing his guitar, quietly existing. Anna takes comfort in her work and in Rafael, using them to bury her memories. And slowly, the reader comes to see the analogies between Segura's life, so many centuries ago, and the lives of Anna, Claire and Coop.

As he did in his Booker Prizewinning novel, *The English Patient*, Ondaatje once again takes readers across continents, even decades. In *Divisadero*, he deftly moves between past and present, with his characters trying to carve a future but forever haunted by their painful

Pain

BUSHRA RAHMAN

Salty stream flows
I feel the fall
I taste it...
Then it drops on my breasts
Deepening the pain.

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past. As Anna puts it: "With memory, with the reflection of an echo, a gate opens both ways and we can circle time. A paragraph or an episode from another time will haunt us in the middle of the night, as the words of a stranger can. . . . So that I find the lives of Coop and my sister and my father everywhere . . . as they perhaps still concern themselves with my absence, wherever they are . . . It is the hunger, what we do not have, that holds us together."

Although Ondaatje draws the same story from start to finish, as the haunting similarities emerge, you realize the strength of the novel lies in their quiet intensity. It left me with the question of fate: Do attempts to escape a damaged past always end in a re-creation of that past elsewhere, or is the act of re-creation a coming to terms, a finding of peace? And for people like Anna, Claire and Coop, is the damage irrevocable?

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A 1971 poem

SOHAIL AHMED

Conversations with Suleman by Afsan Chowdhury; Dhaka: Shrabon; 2007; pp. 35.

Conversations with Suleman is a long poem, a prose poem, by Afsan Chowdhury about a crippled ex-Mukti Bahini named Suleman. The author, according to the introduction, often encountered Suleman seated on his wheelchair roaming "the lanes and alleys of Mohammedpur...(in a) wild, dirty, disheveled" state, "foul words spewing from his mouth." Suleman's rage was the rage of those who felt used and torn up, those who fought to re-make history and yet were betrayed by it. Accordingly, the poem is narrated in two voices. One is that of Suleman, the freedom fighter who lost his legs in the war, later lost his hands and hung on for some time on bummed cigarettes and 'foreign' charity, driven insane by the advent of a new dawn:

"I have sores everywhere and they smell bad. The nurse, a whitey woman, Puts talcum powder on them regularly, So that you can come and smell something nice."

"Even sitting on my chair I have been wounded so many times, In endless wars with shadows and smoke, That won't let go the arms of my reluctant life... And you dare ask Suleman the king About wars and scars? Show me, you *bhain*----- bastard, What you did with your arms that still move? Are they good for caressing my ass Now crawling with bedsores?"

while another voice stands outside of Suleman, looking on with a mixture of despair, sorrow and guilt at what might have been, and what had actually happened:

"And Suleman lies spent on his bed of memories, where the war never ends and bullets still fly and he whimpers in jagged pain as he rages on, watching his life on the telly pass by, wanting his guns and grenades,

conversations with suleman



afsan chowdhury

so that he can roll on the ground and fire again and again..."

The poem may not be everybody's cup of tea. It is an angry poem, with a large part of the anger directed towards the safe, secure, smug middle-class-constructed fictions about our war of liberation, but perhaps the important point to remember here is that in doing so it provides a necessary corrective to such comforting myths. It also reminds us, however imperfectly (and here one has to mention that the unnecessary Americanese in the poem such as 'gonna' are jarring to read) that a primary function of poems and fiction is to enable us to see things in a new way. If *Conversations with Suleman* succeeds in making the "few who will read it (to) contemplate on a strange past and even stranger present" then the author will have reason to be satisfied.

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