

NONFICTION

my god died young

SASTHI BRATHA

One day when my communist friend and I were walking towards Coffee House, the little boy approached us and held out his hand. He clutched the copper coin I gave him in his twisted hand and put out the other to my friend. "Get away," my friend said, walking on. The boy kept pace with us with his outstretched palm, staring silently at him "Come on, get away," he shouted again, full of anger and disgust, "or I'll call the police." The boy persisted. I put my hand inside my pocket and was about to take out another coin when the boy said, "No, him." My friend grimaced, oozing venom from his face, when the boy's eyes lit up with scorn. "What's the matter? You have no money...?" My friend turned away, ran up the steps of Coffee House and took the chair at his usual table. "They are a terrible nuisance, you know," he said to me, as I joined him. "You shouldn't encourage them." After a pause, he added, "This is what gives the country a bad name. Americans with bulging cameras go goggle-eyed over them. It's good for the tourist trade, so they say...but in a socialist state there would be no beggars."

I thought of grey walls, firing squads and gas ovens. There are so many ways of getting rid of evil. Often I would walk home from college, taking the shorter route through the lane of tupenny harlots. In the evening, the women would stand outside their rickety wooden doors and announce their wares the caked paint lining their faces, heavy earrings tugging at their lobes. The narrow lane was lit by flickering gas-lamps. The big rough men would haggle and shout for a minute or more or a coin less for their fares. A thin stream of black gurgling fluid would flow down the open drain and the raw perfume on the masked women would mingle with the stench of the running sewer to produce a thick suffocating vapour. The women ranged from sixteen to fifty-six, the older ones loud and aggressive in their chatter. I felt a strange fascination for the lane and, though I loathed the stench, could not avoid walking past their siren calls. If I had been more daring I would have visited one of their dens and learnt the lessons of iniquity. But there were too many fears which wriggled about within my mind...

Sometimes I would peep into one of their windows, fling a smile to one of the younger girls. They would raise their fingers, showing their prices, make a clucking noise with their tongues and I would quicken my steps, happy to be on the wider street again. One afternoon when the lane was quiet, a few unplastered women chatting in the little open spaces between their huts, I saw the beggar boy coming out of one of those doors... It was too early for the older men. The shadows were young, the sun had barely set and the gas-lamps were still asleep.

He smiled at me and I smiled back, an imperceptible conspiratorial nod instantly passing between us. "You come here?" he asked, coming up to me. I nodded. "You



ARTWORK BY AMINA

want a lay?" (The word in Bengali is rather rough and I was startled to hear it from him.) "No," I replied, "I'm going home." He smiled again, this time like an understanding priest doling out absolution. "All right, I get you one. Good, very young." A host of feelings rose up in me. I wondered how old he was, how long he had been at the game... I felt squirmy with him. The rough cynicism of the adult coming from the lips of a child. "I don't go with women," I replied bluntly. He looked quizzically at me for a while and then burst into a loud, hurting laugh. "You have no money, eh?" I felt angry and resentful. He was getting the better of me. I threw him a sharp glance and started to walk away.

"Eh, what's the matter?" he shouted, hobbling after me. "Nothing," I replied, "I'm going home." He appeared puzzled and then he smiled again. "No woman, eh?" I shook my head. He kept apace for a few moments, nodding to himself. "Good. Good," he said finally. "Don't," he advised, giving me a wink.

Then he caught my hand and pulled me to a halt. "Come and see my mother. She wants to meet you," he said. "There," he added, pointing to the door from which he had just come out. I looked at him, startled once more. Obviously, I wasn't much good at making guesses. I followed him obediently to the door.

The room was small, an oil lamp burning in the corner... There was a cot bed against one wall and a woman breathing heavily through her mouth lay huddled over it. I couldn't see her face, but the sound of strained lungs was old. She groaned as she saw me enter and the boy said, "Ma, I have brought him." The woman raised herself on an elbow and opened her eyes. "Yes, yes, God bless you, my

son," she said, looking at me. I stood in the corner like a pillar of salt. "Go and bring him some sweetmeats," she told her son, and before I could demur the boy had gone out of the room... I remained silent.

"You study at college?" she asked. I nodded, feeling guilty and ashamed. "My son was at school... But I can't work any more..."

The boy came back with a packet in his hand and put two pieces of sweetmeat on a small brass plate. They must have cost more than I would give him over two weeks. I felt as if they would stick in my gullet, but I ate them all the same.

"I must go now," I said finally. "Come see us again," the old woman replied. "And God bless you, my son." Returning home I could not eat my dinner that evening.

A few days later my friend and I came out of college and decided to take the first tram home. The little boy came up to us and held out his hand to my friend. Fearing his censure, I dared not do anything myself. My friend brushed the beggar aside and walked on haughtily, the boy following. I fell behind, guilty at my own impotence, watching the two of them fight their silent battle... Finally they came to the tram stop. Here my friend was stumped. He had to wait in the queue and there was no getting away. The beggar boy fell on his feet, hand still outstretched. My friend fidgeted about, looking away, impatience and frenzy thickening his face. But whichever way he turned the boy met his gaze, sure and defiant like silence. I was still a few yards away and could feel the string tightening to snapping pitch...

Then unexpectedly the tram came. The men ahead rushed in through the open door. I ran to get in too, the boy's face was full of hate; not for my friend but for the tram. So, just as my friend was about to get in, the boy threw his twisted arm round his feet, holding on to him. Like the stroke of a thin metal whip, anger ripped across my friend's eyes. He kicked the beggar and jumped inside. I too got in after him. As the tram moved off, I saw the boy fall to the ground, rolling a little down the pavement. My friend and I were silent all through the journey.

I did not see the boy for the next few days. The summer holidays came and college adjourned for over two months. When we reassembled, the other boys were once more a part of the familiar scene. But 'my' beggar wasn't among them. Finally I asked one of the other boys about him. He

had been taken to hospital with a fracture. They didn't know much about him, couldn't really care. I went along to the hospital, but the search through the casualty lists of that particular day was tedious. As I didn't know his name, I had to go round the wards, describing the boy to each of the matrons. I was about to give up when one of the sisters said, "Yes, I do remember. He couldn't walk properly. He broke his arm, falling from a tram, I think. It wasn't serious but we had to keep him in plaster for a month. He was discharged about three weeks ago." So I walked back to the lane to find his mother. It was late evening and the women were out on the street. I found the old door I had once entered, but there was a new young face on its steps. She smiled, announcing her price and a list of blissful confections she could offer. I shook my head and asked for the old woman and the little boy. It must have touched a weak spot in her, for she made a face at me, spitting out a huge glob of saliva on the street. "She gone to the dark place," she said. And as I continued to stare uncomprehendingly at her, she added, "Why don't you go there too, if you like her so much?" I did not understand her but it didn't matter.

I never saw my beggar friend again.

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Those first years of college life were like that, full of blind alleys. Experience seldom led up to anything. I was afraid of soiling my hands. Everything I did was a still, meant for the magic lanterns of posterity. I sought out unusual situations not because they interested me but because they would make exciting copy for my future biographer. The feeling of impending greatness, squatting over me like a giant shadow, never left me. I posed to others and also to myself. I was afraid of that lump of inert matter I carried within me. I was unable to rouse myself for anyone or anything. My outward actions were frenzied and daring, because the inner man was so tame and ordinary.

I never liked myself. I had no real friends yet I discarded my mother, the only person who loved me without return. I won laurels at college, was known to be charming, witty and clever. Yet there was the persistent feeling of unease lest the mask should crack. My passions were second rate, my mind a jumble of clichés collected from others. Yet I strained myself, wanted to rise above the insipid level of what I knew to be my very mediocre capacities. I could not feel for the poor yet I made loud noises about the 'proletarian revolutions'. My predominant emotion was envy. I wanted all the things that other people had yet remain myself. I longed for a sophisticated home, but was proud of my Brahmin lineage... I was the shadow of a shadow. It is always hard to build a life on such frail foundations.

\*Slightly abridged for publication purposes. Taken from Penguin's *The Non-Fiction Collection* reviewed below. Sasthi Bratha was educated at Presidency College and lives in London.

Penguin India's Non-Fiction: they should have kept the table!

FARHAD AHMED

Reading through the introduction to Penguin India's triple-decker volumes of *The Non-Fiction Collection* (New Delhi: 2007) - one is plunged headlong into the facts behind India's supreme publishing powerhouse: that it began operating at a time when "trade publishing in English" was virtually unknown in the country (which might be a slight exaggeration since small publication houses were always operating in that country), and that Penguin's operational beginnings were becomingly modest - "the company launched its local programme in 1987 with seven titles; two novels in English and one in translation from Bengali, two biographies, a travelogue and a book of poems."

Today, relatively speaking, Penguin India is the proverbial 800-pound gorilla in the room, or ring. (In the corner wearing yellow trunks weighing in at a...), bringing out 200 new books annually across a wide range of genres. It also claims to have on its list, and rightly one thinks, authors from every country in the subcontinent. It seems that had Penguin not continued to publish out-of-India authors like Nepalese Manjushree Thapar and the rambunctious Sri Lankese Burgher portraitist Carl Muller (whose latest offering *Maudiegirl and the von Bloss Kitchen* is out under Penguin India imprint), it is quite likely that they would have been known only inside their own countries, and that too insufficiently. More and more it seems that to get a decent South Asian name and audience one needs the Penguin seal of good housekeeping. Penguin has also ventured into publishing English translations of classics in India's regional languages. In 2005, with the launch of its Hindi list, Penguin says it became the "first global publisher to publish in an Indian language other than English", and that now it releases over sixty titles every year in Hindi, Marathi, Malayalam and Urdu. Though translations of Bengali classics by Tagore, Bankim and Sharatchandra are out in Penguin editions, one was to wonder why Penguin does not publicize them. Regarding translations, Penguin India is also lucky enough to also draw on its global resources, as is evident from their recent publication of the English translation of Mario Vargas Llosa's *In The Feast of the Goat*. At a price markedly cheaper in Kolkata, one should mention, than it would be were it to be bought by visiting Indian bhavis in New York.

Non-fiction writing seems to be gaining popularity among writers and readers alike in South Asia, as attested to by the growing number of publications in this genre (not the least of which is Penguin's own other first-rate publication titled *First Proof*). Which is why no doubt Penguin India thought that it was an

opportune time to come out with a triple-decker publication. Here the publisher rightly aimed at a broad coverage, and therefore it is no surprise to see that the volumes contain writing on all conceivable topics, from the straight reportage of Bollywood Mumbai in the film magazine 'Star Dust' to opinion pieces on Kashmir and Gujarat, from internal migration and refugees to a changing Benares city. As a natural corollary therefore it is no great surprise that the list of writers seems to embrace a diverse group of writers and scribes, with prominent authors coying up beside the none-too-prominent ones: India's ex-cricketer coach John Wright beside Khushwant Singh and Satyajit Ray, Chitrita Banerji (with her fine writing on East Bengal, and particularly Mysmangshy, cooking) up alongside Arundhati Roy, Kamala Das and Ruskin Bond. The criterion for selection and publication seems to have been all prose writing dealing with India, though in the case of Fareed Zakaria (an American) and Sara Suleri (a Pakistani) the connection seems slim indeed, with the only standard seems to have been published by Penguin somewhere, some time. This wide choice of writers naturally makes for quality that can dip, and there are pieces lumped in here with others that can be truthfully said to not quite match up. On the other hand, readers are introduced to many a fine but otherwise relatively unknown writer.

Even quality is an unavoidable risk in a publication wanting to cover all possible bases, and when the publisher claims that here are showcased authors who have topped best-seller charts in India and abroad, and won virtually every major literary prize, including the Nobel Prize, the Jananpath Award, the Man Booker Prize, the Shabitya Akademi Award and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, that it "is unlikely that you will find a richer, more representative collection of writing from or about South Asia," one tends to agree with them.

In the foreword the publisher reminisces, in the context of Penguin India's long journey to its present pre-eminence, that "when it was set up in a two-bedroom flat in New Delhi Penguin India's most valuable asset was a boardroom table made of teak, at which strategies were devised, contracts signed and commitments made. Today, the table is no longer listed among the company's assets", since it has been replaced by... well, what is termed as "the finest list of Indian authors (or authors of Indian origin) anywhere in the world." Which is all very fine, but this reviewer begs to differ. Why ditch that loyal teak table? Damned shame we say...

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TORONTO Journal

SAYEEDA JAIGIRDAR

"A butterfly's wings may create changes in the atmosphere that may ultimately alter the path of a tornado..."  
Edward Lorenz in the *Chaos Theory*

We watched his campaign unfold across the border. At first, his name sounded strange and unfamiliar, the "Hussein" resonating perhaps uneasily, with many of us, but the mixture of vowels and consonants in the first and last name was disconcerting. We watched him speak, lead debates during the primaries and it was then that Torontonians as well as the rest of Canada began to take notice of this calm orator who had stood against the seasoned senator from New York. He was actually contemplating running for the presidency of the United States! A couple of our friends laughed and said "The Audacity of Hope, indeed-with that name? Sometimes, in North America, one cannot even go through Human Resources personnel for a job application with those syllables. Ha, president!" But my multicultural students in college were excited. "Can you imagine miss?" they said. "...What it would mean for all of us, you know, people like us, immigrants, even here in Canada." Mikhaela came home from school and told me the story of a lady on a bus who had to give up her seat because of the colour of her skin. "Is that fair, mommy?" she said. It appeared that fairness was in the winds of change that blew on the other side of the border. On the night that he won the Democratic nomination, Torontonians were ecstatic-we watched the voted counted on CNN and CBC. We sat in homes, sport bars, restaurants and food courts and some of us prayed for this man who dared to hope. Advertisements crept up in television commercials in which his catch phrase was echoed, "Yes we can." The ripple effect of the butterfly's wings was spreading across the border, seeping into the hearts and minds of the people who heard him speak.

Single mothers who were raising difficult, unruly children dared to say "Yes we can." Immigrant parents who were struggling to survive and pool their resources for an education for their child began to say, "Yes we can." We began to fall in step with him, the local and national media covering the American election more than the local politics. Our politicians began to pale in comparison-American politics began to take center stage. Torontonians in all their diversity began to mutter, "Where is our Obama?"

The introduction of Sarah Palin into the position of the Republican ticket for the vice president lifted everyone's spirits. Here was a charming entertainer, whose sense of international politics was as informed as that of her sense of spatial geography. We, Torontonians began to watch the late night comedy shows with much gusto. Politics had never been so much fun, such hilarity in making fun of popular figures. It also helped that both Palin and the democratic

The Butterfly Effect\*

candidate were such extraordinarily good-looking people. We cheered on Tina Fey in her comedy routines of Palin, suits and all. We felt a little sorry for Senator McCain, who was really, honestly, a bit too old for all these energized people around him and we appreciated his sense of humour and respect for his opponent at the end of the race.

Election night was electrifying as the votes were counted and Obama made his acceptance speech. Even Oprah Winfrey looked overwhelmed. For those who had feared that the Bradley Effect\* would influence the outcome of this election had their misgivings put to rest.

The Inaugural ceremony was an uplifting experience that gripped Canada as much as it did the United States. The television networks across the United States vied to have the best coverage. Their Canadian counterparts were very much in the running as CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) and other networks gave it top coverage. Work came to a halt in Toronto at noon as the ceremony began. People in offices, schools, hospitals, and banks huddled around television sets. Sports bars, restaurants reported a brisk business as lunchtime patrons came early and did not appear to want to leave as the ceremonies unfolded. Nathan Phillips Square, which has a humungous screen, used for rock concerts had the ceremony unfolding across it, much to the delight of the crowd that gathered around it. Women wiped away tears and strangers hugged each other after it was all over.

Canada was the first country that Obama visited after taking the office of the President of the United States of America. Although his visit was a short one (six hours long) a lot of his fans from Toronto decided to make the four hour bus ride to the capital Ottawa, just to have a glimpse of him. A news commentator remarked on the crowd that gathered around the high security area of Parliament Hill "It looks as if they are waiting for a rock star". President Obama spoke with Canada's Governor General Michaëlle Jean (whose birth place is Haiti) and she told him that Canadians really loved him. He joked that if things do not go well in the States, he could always come to Canada. They laughed heartily and their pictures were all over the front page the next day. In his news conference he said, "I love Canada" taking everyone by surprise and prompting our Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Conservative Party) to resort to equally informal language. When CBC's Peter Mansbridge asked Harper his impressions of Obama, the usually formal Harper gushed, "He is really an easy guy to talk to." So Obama came, saw and conquered figuratively as well as linguistically on our side of the border.

The economic tornado is spinning the United States and much of the world into a downward maelstrom. Canada, as the United States biggest trading partner is beginning to feel the effects of the recession, though our banks here are based on solid regulatory foundations. In Toronto,

we see a lot of laid off friends and neighbours who are desperately looking for work. For many of them, a missed pay cheque or two would mean losing their homes. Their hopes seem to be focused across the border as they hope that Obama's plans for the United States may have a butterfly effect on us.

CBC's Peter Mansbridge asked an associate of Martin Luther King as to what Martin Luther King would say to Obama if he were here. He replied, "Martin Luther King would say- Know that you did not walk this way by yourself, that there were others before you. Also know that you have the hand of God on your shoulders."

\*The Bradley Effect, less commonly called the Wilder effect, is a theory proposed to explain observed discrepancies between voter opinion polls and election outcomes in some US government elections where a white candidate and a non-white candidate run against each other. Instead of ascribing the results to flawed methodology on the part of the pollster, the theory proposes that some voters tend to tell pollsters that they are undecided or likely to vote for a black candidate, and yet, on election day, vote for his white opponent. It was named after Tom Bradley, an African-American.

The term "butterfly effect" is related to the work of Edward Lorenz, and is based in Chaos Theory and sensitive dependence on initial conditions, first described in the literature by Jacques Hadamard in 1890 and popularized by Pierre Duhem's 1906 book.

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This Hour

Asad Chowdhury (translated by Farid Rahman)

Not in a hurry to get anywhere  
Nobody's waiting for me either--  
On the bed the scolding sunlight  
Silences the door and window curtains.

The black-and-white photograph a big blur--  
Raven locks. On an amazed sky  
Fly tufts of white hair.

No work, no leisure time either  
Potter around with my books and notes  
Wipe away the dust whorls of Time,  
Time that never does return.  
The spirit wants to join an adda  
The body is no longer willing  
I startle as I step on a rickshaw:  
Who was it that I'd told to come over?  
And why had I told him to come over?  
Surely that fellow will not be pleased.  
What am I to do? I keep forgetting things...

The time passes with clouds  
I watch the sun-drenched sparrow  
Flock of girls hanging wash on the roof  
Smell of spices sizzling on their bodies.  
This is their time and only theirs  
A break from work that rises and flowers.

All I do is watch buds bloom  
Look at bees buzzing to and fro  
Touch to see misted memories, song,  
And dreams in pieces aplenty.



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THE Non-Fiction COLLECTION 1

THE Non-Fiction COLLECTION 2

THE Non-Fiction COLLECTION 3