

SHORT STORY

Arjun's Bow

SUJOSH BHATTACHARYA
(Translated by Farhad Ahmed)

Rajani Kapal alighted from the bus with his wife only to come face to face with his worst nightmare. He was returning from the city with his wife. His wish had been, after giving the thirteen Rupees he had gotten by pawning his wife's bracelet to the slick-talking lawyer handling his 1972 crop-snatching case, to catch the bus home. That had happened yesterday. Now he was suddenly up against the nightmare. Everybody knew that as soon as evening fell Nutu Mullik liked to down a couple of bottles of Bangla liquor. Rajani Kapal's fear, however, had nothing to do with Nutu Mullik's drinking habits. Nutu was the village headman, police, judge and hangman all rolled into one everybody around here knew that.

In Rajani's hand was a small cloth bag inside which there were some potatoes and vegetables bought from the bazaar as well as a small bundle of court documents. Trying to sound normal he urgently mouthed words at his wife, "Come on come on now, fast, evening's past." Beneath his breath he gnashed his teeth, "Just as evening falls, comes the tiger!" His wife said from behind the sari veil on her face, "That drunk is making big eyes at me, look." Rajani hissed at her, "Quick, come along now, let's cross the road and get into the field."

Nutu Mullik in a voice like a stricken tiger called out, "Hey, you beggar Rajani, stand still."

On Bashirhat's forested horizon evening fell like a government curfew. The bus, having disgorged its passengers, had left, spewing smoke. On the road in front of the tea stall stood a Rajani Kopat fresh back from the court, fear making his chest thud, his wife cringing by his side.

Nutu Mullik, scratching his armpit over an itchy punjabi, barked, "You miserable fool, where did you go?"

"The city. It was a court date."

"Oh, so nowadays every day is your court date? Where did you go the day before?"

"Bhaganpur, answered Rajani."

When during 1970-71 Rajani had been imprisoned in Basharat jailhouse, the red-eyed police chief would harangue him in exactly this way: Where are the party leaders now, which party member comes to your house. Today the Nutu Mulliks were the police. Whoever Nutu touched, he left deep scratch marks. Again Nutu barked at Rajani, "Why? Have you opened an office of your party of sons-of-bitches at Bhaganpur? Back at your old game, eh?"

Nutu's sidekick Haru Bostum sniggered, "Hunh, Nutu, let them go. These bastard Naxals are inviting death on their heads again."

Rajani voiced his protest, "What kind of talk is this? I went to see my brother's wife at Bhaganpur. My brother married, he says come over, visit my household. So that day took my wife over there to visit them. Why bring the party into this? What kind of a question is this?"

Nutu flared up at this. In 1970-71 these low-castes had done whatever they wanted to the gentry. Had grabbed their lands, taken their crops, looted their property, like goats had slaughtered folks like Nutu Mullik. Oh, whenever he thought of those days Nutu felt as if his heart had been gripped by icy fingers. But these days Nutu reigned. If Nutu said the sun rose in the west, then every one of these miserable bastards would echo him, yes, sir, truly the sun rose

in the west. If one didn't keep them under one's feet, showed them the pointed end of sticks, who knew when these beggars' children would again sprout wings and want to fly! At Rajani's logical answer, at his backchat Nutu raged and hissed, "Look out, Rajani, don't fucking fool with me. Don't you play tricks on me. If you start doing that party business again, I'll hang you and your sorry family in the marketplace."

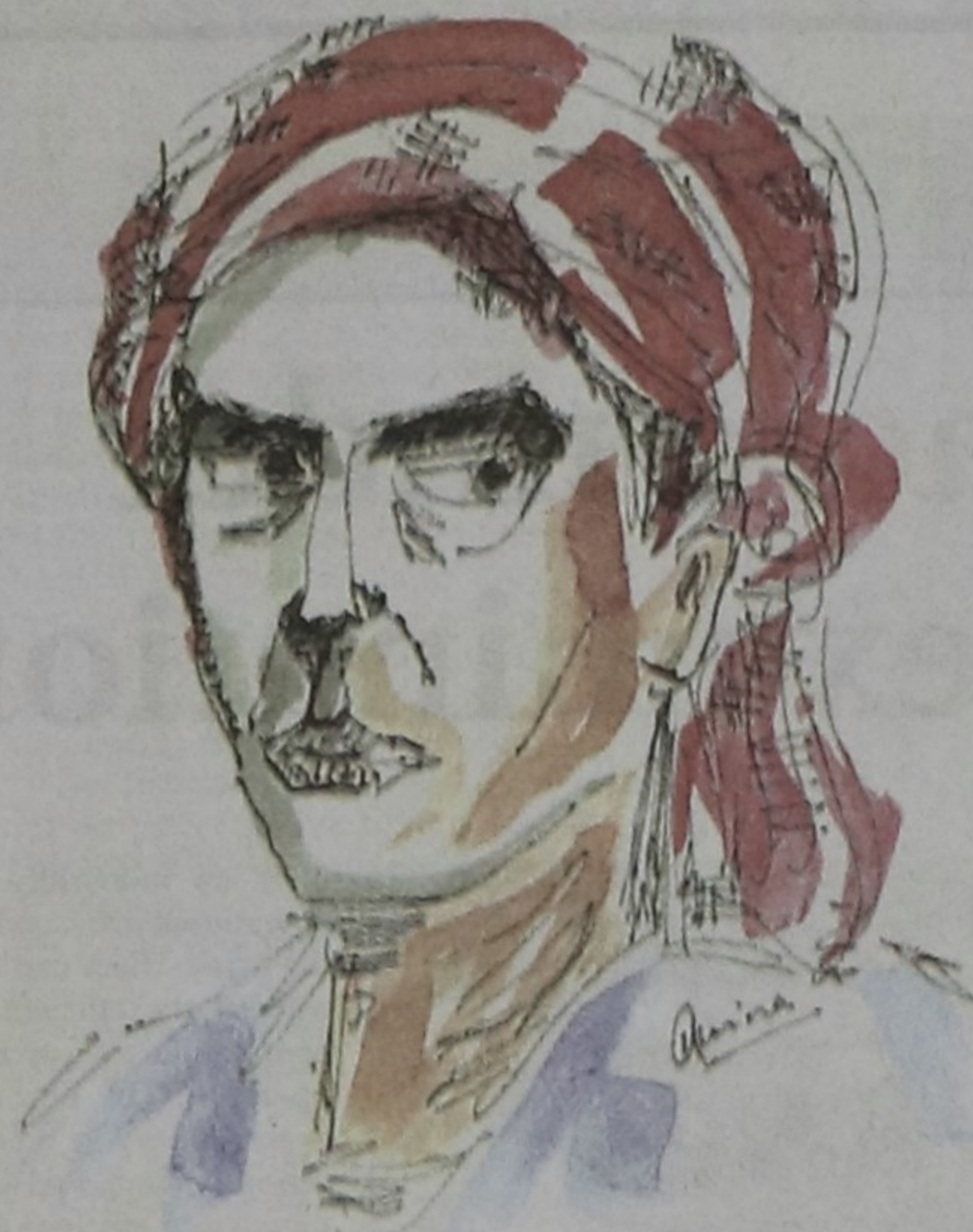
Standing beside him, Rajani's wife was about to retort angrily, but Rajani stopped her by speaking first, "That's true. You're the village headman, you can do whatever you want. We live on the Lord's mercy."

At the note of meekness in Rajani's answer and the mention of the Lord Nutu Mullik's anger came down a notch. He raked his eyes over the sari-draped body of Rajani's wife and said, "Why talk of the Lord, aren't we there for you lot? Why don't you come to my house nowadays? Or is it that you don't need loans and money anymore?"

Rajani sidestepped the question. "Don't get the time to go visiting anywhere these days, everything is work. A hungry stomach burns too much."

Nutu Mullik belched and said in a voice touched with concern, "So you can't come, but you can send your wife--she can take some rice and muri." His tone dripped with honey, the liquor settling warmly in his gut. Haru Bostum opened another bottle and gave it to Nutu. Rajani began walking with his wife. "Of course, master, as long as you are at the helm of everything."

Nutu called out in a loud voice behind them, "Yes, send your wife over." Then in an aside, "Know what, Haru, without subjects, how can there be a king, eh?" He was getting



artwork by amina

drunk. Rajani now began to walk faster, his wife falling in behind him. He spurred her on in an impatient tone, and the two of them hurried past the thatched walls of the shops and dropped down to the field. In the distance could be heard the noise of Nutu's drunken revelry.

On stepping down into Sidurian's helter-skelter field Rajani let out a breath of relief. Once he was in the village there would be no cause for alarm. The police camp at Bholaipur was five villages away, and at night the police tended not to disturb the villagers; that there were not some of Nutu Mullik's men in the village it would not be correct to say, yet in the village Rajani felt relatively safe, and when he would enter the village Krishak Samity office he would feel emboldened, just like he did in the days of the disturbances five decades back.

Entering the darkened doorway his wife said, "Was it the right thing to do?" Rajani did not reply. His wife swiftly snapped twigs and sticks to light the stove. She said, "I was saying, that party you talk about, that's a disaster. If you join it again, what will Nutu Mullik do?"

The pot was put on top of the stove in the courtyard, and Rajani looked at his wife in the light of its fire. An owl hooted in the distance; there was yet no moon in the sky tonight. Rajani snapped, "Shut your mouth. What is the choice? To listen to you and work for Nutu ahead of working for the Party?" His wife shoved leaves into the stove and blew on the fire through a metal pipe. Wiping her eyes with her sari end she said, "That you know better. You are such a big pundit nowadays. You've been to jail. In the meantime I die." Rajani said in a softened tone, "And when the party people come why do you offer them a glass of water, a plate of rice? That too is a disaster." His wife did not answer. She pushed leaves into the stove.

Rajani tried to explain to his wife, "See what they've written in the party paper. A seven-point programme for the village. Land to the tiller. Less taxes to the government. Take away the jotedar's guns."

His wife snapped her head up from the stove, "Hah, no shield, no sword, yet the men go to hunt! You've been there before once, you've seen how many died, how many rotted in jails. So many court cases, and yet you don't learn. The hell with your paper!"

Had it been the old days Rajani would have flattened his wife's face with one blow of his hand. Today he laughed, "And what kind of a man would I be if I fled with my tail between my legs at the first blow? What manner of man is he who hides his face behind a woman after a policeman's lathi blow? Take care of the rice! First the stove's heat and now your temper...it must be done by now."

His wife took the lid off the pot and stirred it with a ladle. The fire had gone down, and she lit the lamp with it. Rajani from among his court papers took out the party paper, and muttering to himself, began to read it by the light of the lamp. The late evening's deepening darkness began to press down on the village. Rajani read the paper. After a while the sound of somebody coughing could be heard from outside. Hurriedly Rajani swept the paper underneath the reed mat. He looked out, "Oh, old man Jamini,

come in, come in."

Jamini was an old inhabitant of the village, an old hand at being a lathial. He had taken part in the Tebagha rebellion, had used his lathi to break open many a zamindar's skull, had served time in jails. Now the skin over his eyes drooped, the eyelids were white, Jamini sat down in the doorway, straightening his legs, "So tell me what news of the city."

"What news do you want to know?"

"Whatever news there is. Tell me about your case."

"Huh! What can I say of that? Filling the lawyer's belly. Let me tell you about the party."

"Which party?"

"Naxal Party."

"Oh, that party? So where will the next fight be? Till Nutu is cut down? Till you go to jail again?" Jamini rebuked him.

Rajani shuffled papers around in silence for a while. Then made a cone out of a little stray piece of paper and poking it at his ear said, "The fight now will be severe, I think something is bound to give. The party has given us a seven-point programme for the villagers."

"You fellows give seven points, Nutu gives twenty points, CPM gives thirty-six points. Hopefully the farmers won't get bowled over with all these points. The police camp is there, the bastard Nutu Mullik is there too, what will the party do? Think with a cool head. You're young, hot-headed."

On the line of mango-berry-coconut trees a sliver of moonlight finally fell. The village began to settle into the darkness. Old man Jamini whiled away the time talking. In the light of the kerosene lamp, spelling out the words aloud and muttering to himself, Rajani Kopat read the party's declaration. He did not understand it all, but what he did comprehend began a large disturbance within him. What if the land belonged to the tiller, what if it really happened? The fighting, the killing, the police, Nutu Mullik's oppression, Rajani could see clearly all the things that would ensue. And then what? Was there something wrong with the declaration, or was it that he couldn't understand everything in it? The party was in turmoil. But so what, he thought, this was a party that was wet with blood, sweat and tears, which spoke from the heart, said simple truths. That it was not another vote-hungry trickster parliamentary party, of that Rajani was sure.

His wife said, "Here is the rice." But Rajani sat in studied silence, staring ahead.

His wife again said, "Here's your plate of rice." Rajani then suddenly blurted out a question, "That big knife I had before I went to jail, do you remember, where is that knife now?"

Annoyed, his wife replied, "Why? Who are you going to cut up? It's hidden in the straw bag for rice."

Rajani asked her again, in order to reassure himself of the answer, "It's there, right?"

His wife shot back, "If you don't believe me, go take a look with your own eyes. Death is calling you again, isn't it?"

Reassured now, Rajani as he rolled some rice into a ball laughed and said, "Don't you understand? The Party never downs its weapons. And if we were to go lose our knives, it wouldn't be right, would it?"

From *Naxal Andolon'er Golpo*, edited by Bijhita Ghosh, reviewed below. Farhad Ahmed is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Naxal Stories

KHADEMUL ISLAM

Naxal Andolon'er Golpo, edited by Bijhita Ghosh and brought out Punoshcho publishers of Kolkata, is available in Dhaka bookstores. The second edition was brought out in January 2008, a reprint of the original published in January 1999. The editor notes in his introduction that it was a matter of gratification for him that the first print run sold out quickly, and that the second edition has had twenty new stories added to it.

The book's dedication reads "In memory of the Shaheeds of 1970...for the days that floated by on tears..." a testament to the continuing hold of West Bengal's late 1960s-70s Naxalite movement on the Bengali bhadralok. Its iconic high priest was Charu Mazumdar, and the movement emerged out of the volatile left politics of Kolkata and West Bengal of the 1960s. The sixties, of course, was a time of national liberation movements and anti-colonial struggles, in which global revolution's two dominant salvation narratives were offered by Soviet Union and Red China. It was a brutally stark choice. Communist parties the world over subscribed to either of these two "lines", which meant the 1962 Sino-Soviet split saw them fracturing them along the lines of the main fissure. In India it led to the break-up, in 1964, of the Communist Party of India, with the old-guard Establishment Left remaining within the CPI (with its roots in the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, its strategic choice of the parliamentary electoral route to power and affiliation with Nehru's Congress Party) versus the Maoists of Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPI (M), with their call for peasant revolts and a global fight against 'social imperialism'.

Bengal, ever a step ahead of the rest of India (the 'what Bengal thinks today the rest of India thinks tomorrow' formulation), was seduced by the siren song of the Maoists, a seduction that in practice meant CPI (M) for a time was simultaneously a party of elections and legislative compromise as well as attempting to contain radical/extremist factions that disdained those very elections and the corridors of state power. The end result was a suicidal civil war between these two major factions, which spectacularly came to a head in the Naxal movement and its eventual repression by the West Bengal government, particularly in Kolkata.

In 1967 a peasant rebellion was ignited by Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal in the Darjeeling District of Naxalbari that was supported by the hardline CPI (M) groups and which received the papal blessings of the Chinese Communist Party. The period 1969-1971 saw pitched battles between the fierce insurgency and the West Bengal state apparatus (an apparatus in which their former comrades were present in substantial governing coalition numbers). The Coordinating Committee faction led by Charu broke away to form the CPI (ML). The revolt moved into its Andhra 'Srikakulam' armed phase, and Charu issued a call for revolution. All hell broke loose. Thousands of West Bengal's best and brightest students, ranging from St Stephens College in Delhi to Presidency College in Kolkata, joined the Naxalites. For a brief period it seemed as if the revolution would sweep everything before it: parts of Siliguri, where in the 1964 party conference Charu Mazumdar had first officially given notice of the new mood, was even briefly declared independent. Heads of landlords were impaled on stakes; bombs exploded in Kolkata cinema houses. Indira Gandhi unleashed the Central Reserve Police on them, and some of the most horrific scenes of police-state brutalities were enacted in Kolkata. One of the worst

occurred in the city's Kashipur and Baranagar areas, where the police dragged out Naxal suspects and killed them, among them Saroj Dutta and Sushil Raychoudhury, two fully paid-up members of the bhadralok intellectual left. Faction killed faction, party cadre slaughtered cadre, and the armed police boot-heeled on them all. Kanu Sanyal denounced Charu's 'line'; Charu himself died. By 1972 the Naxalbari movement was broken (by Jyoti Basu, then the home minister), and in 1975 was finished off by Indira Gandhi's Emergency.

That period of political idealism and violence has given birth to a steady stream of writing: short stories, poems and novels. It is a stream that in West Bengal continues to flourish even today. The Naxals remain a fertile source for the West Bengal creative imagination, and the astonishing diversity and range of this literary effort can be seen in the hundred short stories of the volume under review. The editor writes that he chose stories that reflected the "dreams of the 1970s, hopes of liberation and the return home-absent from home of those up-and-down days of turmoil and rage," and to a very large extent he has succeeded, with writers such as Bimal Kaur, Surajit Dasgupta, Mahasweta Devi, Krishna Chakrabarty, Subimal Misra, Siddharta Saha, Amar Mitra, Samaresh Basu, Ashim Trivedi, Sandeep Bandhpadhaya and Manabendra Pal in the mix. In Bengali texts and printed words and fictional works, limned against a CPI (M) government afflicted by artherosclerosis and neo-liberalism after close to forty years in power, insurrectionary Maoism is still alive and kicking.

It is more so in the field. "A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery;" Mao famously wrote in his 'The Question of "Going Too Far"', "it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another. A rural revolution is a revolution by which the peasantry overthrows the power of the feudal landed class." Vast tracts of India remain under a restive semi-feudal order,

underpinned by a twining of Brahmin caste codes and state power. It is therefore not surprising that organizations and party variants of the old Naxalbari movement--almost all of whom can trace themselves back to the splinter groups or breakaways factions of the CPI (M) in the fissiparous cycle known to academics as 'Left factionalism'--today hold sway over a vast stretch from Bihar to the borders of Karnataka, the so-called 'Red Belt', under the organizational umbrella of the Communist Party of India (Maoist). While China's Maoist mandarins have taken to pinstripe suits and Shanghai-style capitalism (whose schoolbooks famously mention Mao just once, in a chapter on etiquette!), Charu's May 1970 declaration ironically still rings true in parts of India: "Without class struggle the battle of annihilation the initiative of the poor peasant masses cannot be released, the political consciousness of the fighters cannot be raised, the new man cannot emerge, the people's army cannot be created." A huge, horrific, and underreported war is taking place, especially in Chattisgarh, between its Maoists and the state-sponsored terror of Salwa Judum. A literature like West Bengal's Naxalbari one is yet to spring out of these struggles, but as the editor of this volume says when discussing the morality of Naxal politics, "only time will tell."

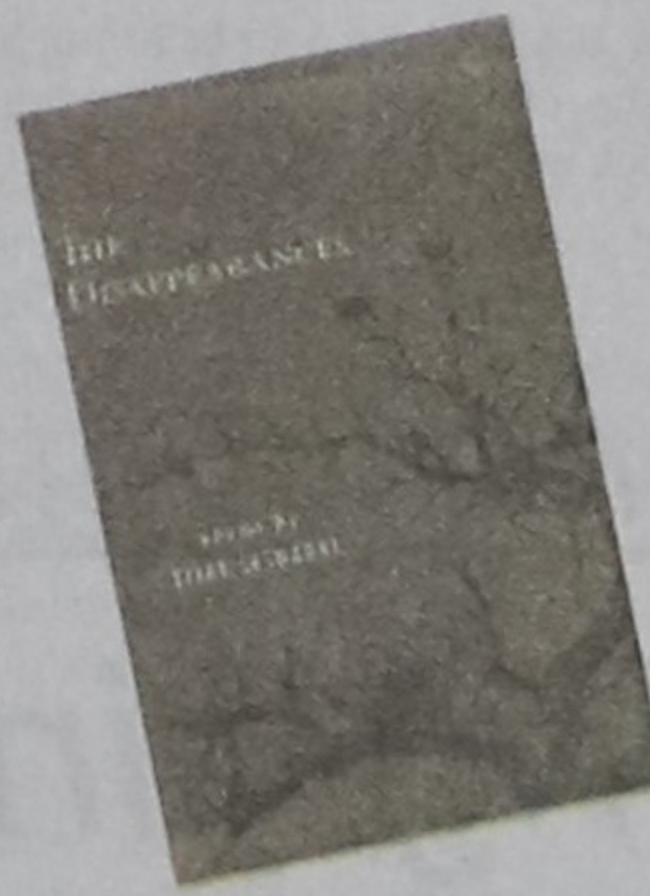
Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Vijay Seshadri: An American Poet

ZAKARIA HYDER

Vijay Seshadri was born in Bangalore, India, in 1954, and was transplanted to America at the age of five. He grew up in Columbus, Ohio, and perhaps as befits a poet-in-making, spent chunks of his youth bumming around in that huge country. It included stints in the Pacific Northwest working in the seasonal salmon industry in Alaska, and as a logger, both very physically demanding job experiences rare for the ambitious, driven first-generation children of Americans of Indian descent, tending as they do to live within cloistered cultural and social frames. He also was a Ph.D student at Columbia University, in its Middle Eastern Languages and Literature department, before abandoning it and going for an M.F.A. Vijay Seshadri's poems, essays, and reviews have appeared in a wide variety of publications, including *AGNI*, *The American Scholar*, *Antaeus*, *Bomb*, *Boulevard*, *Lumina*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Shenandoah*, *The Southwest Review*, *The Threepenny Review*, *Versé*, *Western Humanities Review*, *The Yale Review*, *the Times Book Review*, *The Philadelphia Enquirer*, *Bomb*, *The San Diego Reader*, and *TriQuarterly*, as well as in many anthologies, including *Under 35: The New Generation of American Poets*, *Contours of the Heart*, *Staying Alive: Real Poems for Unreal Times*, and *The Best American Poetry 1997 and 2003*.

He has won many awards, including James Laughlin Award for his books of poems *The Long Meadow* (2004) and *Wild Kingdom* (1996). *The Disappearances* is a compilation of poems from the



two, and was brought out by Harper Collins India in 2007. He has been the recipient of grants from the New York Foundation for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, and awarded *The Paris Review's* Bernard F. Connors Long Poem Prize and the MacDowell Colony's Fellowship for Distinguished Poetic Achievement. He teaches poetry and nonfiction writing at Sarah Lawrence College, and lives in Brooklyn with his wife and son.

Vijay's an American poet, and though Indian poets such as Jeet Thayil praise his poem in unqualified words ("To read him is to enter a room of speed and light and air, where the myths we know and the history we are subject to are made brighter, sharper, more meaningful...") yet it is hard to see how, for South Asian readers unfamiliar with American preoccupations, scenes or idioms, with American life in general, Seshadri's poems will be anything but difficult, even abstruse. In certain poems, however, as in the one reproduced below from *Disappearances*, they might appreciate an inside job, a rakish, smiling yet deadpan drawing of an American inner city neighbourhood, whose effects not least of all depend on an inside out turning of local lingo ("Thelma, you the man").

Thelma

We have a small place on an ugly street,
though we keep it spick and span.
I take the garbage out, but you,
Thelma, you the man

brilliant as the velvet eye
setting off a peacock's feather,
rayed as the sun is rayed
through storming, broken weather

and gilt-edged clouds. And me?
I strip to my birthday suit
and scream out the window at the Yemeni kids,
who scream back, 'Sharmout'

rolling by on their Rollerblades.
You and me, Thelma, and the little squirt,
with me on the stoop
in my cap turned backward and my undershirt.

Zakaria Hyder teaches English in Seattle.

Cranberry Day

Ferdous Nahar
(translated by Farid Rahman)

The leaves sweat heavily
Picking up
From the molten-gold colour
An eternity of happiness
Beneath my feet trembles
The ground of fallen leaves --

I might wish for such a grave
With age my wish list has changed
From clapping palms to somber looks
Childhood to maturity grasping Thought's forelock
The mirage of words floats before my eye
What's your name, my friend, your country?
Since you've come this way, do sit down let's see...

The leaves sweat heavily
My body feels feverish
The brand-new day melts
Into molten-gold deceit.

Ferdous Nahar is a Bangladeshi poet. Farid Rahman is a schoolteacher.