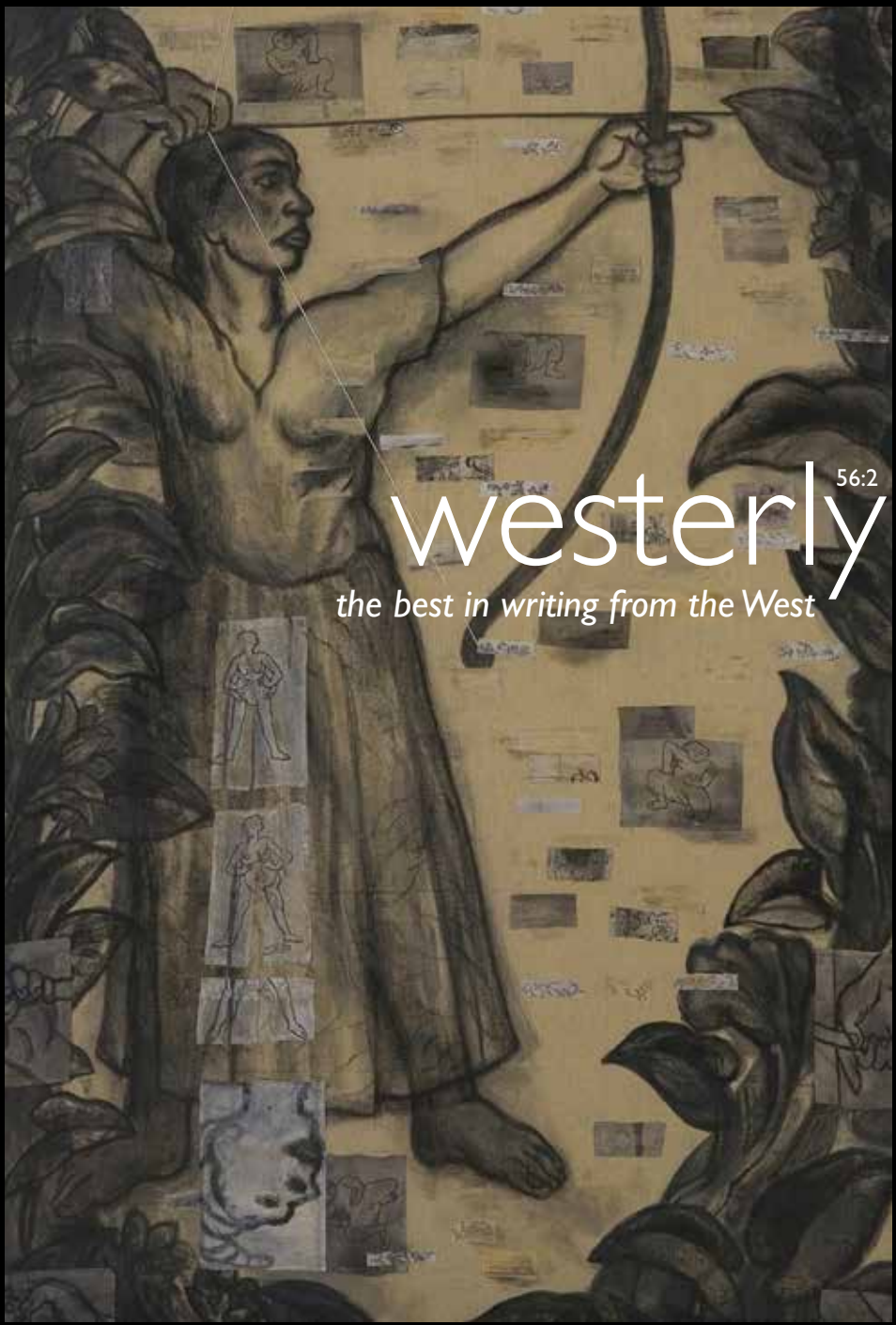

westerly

56:2

the best in writing from the West

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November 2011

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westerly@uwa.edu.au

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Department of **Culture and the Arts**

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From the Editors

This special issue of *Westerly*, 'South/East Asia', continues *Westerly's* long interest in the literatures and cultures of southern and eastern Asia. The first issue of *Westerly*, published in early 1956, contained two essays with an Asian theme, both written by UWA arts undergraduates. 'Australia and Asia: Dr Burton's Challenge' was an analysis of *The Alternative*, by John Burton, the former 1940s Curtin Government adviser on Australia's Asia-Pacific foreign policy, and 'About Your Comrades in Thailand' was a rather tongue-in-cheek anecdotal account of recent student unrest at two Bangkok universities by a Thai economics student Phitaya Smutrakalin.

Since that time, *Westerly* has continued to publish work by Asian writers and on Asian cultures. There have also been other special issues with Asian themes. The first, 'Indonesia' came out in 1966, followed by 'Malaysia and Singapore' in 1971; then, and more ambitiously, an issue titled 'South-East Asia' in 1976, which, the editors of the time said, almost sold out its original print run. *Westerly Looks to Asia*, a collection of *Westerly's* Asian contributions, edited by Bruce Bennett, was published in 1992. And in 1993, 'Crossing the Waters: Asia and Australia' was a 130 page issue guest-edited by

Harry Aveling, then head of Asian Languages at La Trobe University, and Beverley Hooper, then Director of UWA's Centre for Asian Studies. This South/East Asia issue draws on a wide range of voices and our grateful acknowledgement goes to its guest editor, UWA colleague Shalmalee Palekar.

This issue also notes with sadness the recent death of one of WA's most loved writers, TAG Hungerford at the age of ninety-six. Hungerford grew up in Perth during the Great Depression and served in the AIF during World War II. After the war Hungerford moved to Canberra and began his career as a journalist and writer for the Australian War Memorial. He went on to work in Hong Kong, Perth and for the Australian Consulate-General in New York. He also worked as the press secretary to former Prime Minister William Hughes.

In 1987 Hungerford received the Order of Australia for services to Australian Literature and more recently, in 2002, won the Patrick White Award. The Patrick White award is awarded to established writers who have not received recognition for their creative works over the course of their careers. In 1988 the TAG Hungerford Award was established for unpublished West Australian authors to honour Hungerford's contribution to Australian literature.

The second issue of *Westerly* in 2012 will be on the topic of ethics and writing. We welcome contributions that refer in some way to this theme.

TAG Hungerford
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Editorial

Shalmalee Palekar
Guest Editor

When I was invited by Delys Bird and Tony Hughes-d'Aeth to be the guest editor for a Special Westerly issue on South/East Asia, I was simultaneously excited and daunted. I grew up in Mumbai, India, reading voraciously and eclectically (Austen and Dickens one minute, Edgar Rice Burroughs and Douglas Adams the next, horror stories written in the Marathi language and Nehru's *History of India*). By the time I went to the University of Mumbai, majored in English Literature and learnt about the canon and counter-canon, I was already comfortable with the notion that ideas of literature, of creative practice, of art and aesthetics are culturally embedded, dynamic, multiple and contingent. I subsequently came to Australia as a postgraduate student, and ended up going with South Asian Literatures and Cinemas as my academic specialisation.

In the course of this journeying across cities and continents, I have learnt only too well that South/East Asia is conceptual territory which refuses to be contained within nice, neat lines. Indeed, lines of nation, of 'place', of language, belonging and unbelonging, overlap, intersect, and shift. And so the '/' between South and East, not only gestures towards this intriguing heterogeneity, but also highlights the spread of the contributors.

Early in the process, I decided that the idea behind this special issue, was not some sort of definitive representation based on national boundaries. The idea was to present the richness and diversity of voices across this vast region, to highlight the varying voices, tones and timbres of the writers, and the diversity of beliefs and desires they encode in their creative production. The criterion for selection here has been the quality of each individual piece rather than any pseudo-representative character. I have not attempted, for instance, to collect samples from all the best known writers and artists, from countries in this region. I have, however, attempted to strike a judicious balance between internationally established, 'star' writers and artists and emerging newcomers. There are stars—such as Jose Y Dalisay Jr. with his vividly rendered extract from a novel-in-progress, 'Goats', and Shakuntala Kulkarni with her visceral, confronting women warriors in 'And when she roared the universe quaked'. Robert Raymer's story, 'The Blue Thread', effective in its evocation of hopelessness and claustrophobia, would be familiar to the expatriate community in Malaysia. And there are exciting new artists like Kellie Greene, whose images in her photo essay, 'Unknowing Cambodia', haunt viewers with their subtle and rare sensibility.

The accent in this issue is on powerful, compelling writing and art that both creates and breaks stereotypes. There is no attempt here to forcibly yoke together 'universal themes' and 'fundamental conflicts', but to bring together and juxtapose literary and art practices that would be unfamiliar to most Australian readers.

The stories, poems and artwork in this issue are not only from different parts of South/East Asia, but often specific to a particular city (Mohamad Atif Slim's poignant, long poem about the Brisbane floods, 'Twelve hours'), and even a community (Smriti Ravindra's blackly comic story 'The Royal Procession'). So the editors and I decided that we would keep the original word as far as possible, so that regional and unique Englishes would not be replaced by a 'standard' English where all differences were flattened out to an 'internationalese'. However, a few words have been glossed and the

meaning or relevant information provided in a footnote, when this would bring alive the context of the piece—for example, 'darshan' in Goldie Osuri's delicate and sensual Blues poem 'postcard darshan for rj', and 'paying guest' in Ankur Betageri's story 'Bollywood', a seriocomic take on a little known subculture in Mumbai.

Ranjit Hoskote's poems are demandingly, pleasurably cerebral and dazzle with their control and rigour. Sampurna Chattarji's poetry, on the other hand, has a monstrous, brutal beauty about it and one can only marvel at its seemingly effortless creation of different voices and entire worlds. Both these poets leave one feeling simultaneously flayed open and exhilarated. Isabela Banzon and Ahila Sambamoorthy's voices couldn't be more different. The former writes sharp, sometimes painful, poetic vignettes based on everyday life, with a deceptive simplicity that causes the images to linger with the reader, while the latter is the only poet in this collection who writes overtly of seeking the Divine, of striving for moments of transcendence. Omar Musa's work is invigorating; it has a strongly performative quality, and is able to convey a great deal by using powerful yet economic language.

There are three articles included—an enjoyable, insightful interview conducted by John Mateer with Jeet Thayil, the editor of the acclaimed *Bloodaxe* anthology, a catalogue essay by Shilpa Phadke on the cover artist, Shakuntala Kulkarni's use of violence in her multimedia artwork 'and when she roared…', and an academic essay on traumatic materialism and William Gibson by Pramod Nayar. An eclectic gathering, but one that emphasises the flows and connections between these voices and the creative practitioners in the issue, and gives readers a window into the robust work coming out of non-Western academic locations. For example, Nayar's focus on the body as a site of trauma can be fruitfully juxtaposed with Kulkarni's female bodies that are tortured yet inflict pain.

These works are not laboured and there is an ease and lack of self-consciousness seen throughout because their intent is not to 'present' South/East Asia to Australians. What the writers and

artists in this collection do is write about people and the reality or unreality, the despair and humour of their lives. Refreshing, intense and concentrated, emphasising myriad emotions, these works are delineated with lucidity, compassion, and sometimes, rage. It has been said that artistic practice is about finding your own truths, just as it is about getting under people's skins, transpiercing their minds and painting their inner landscapes.

I hope that the landscapes painted in this collection will stay with you for a long time.

Tom Hungerford (1915–2011)

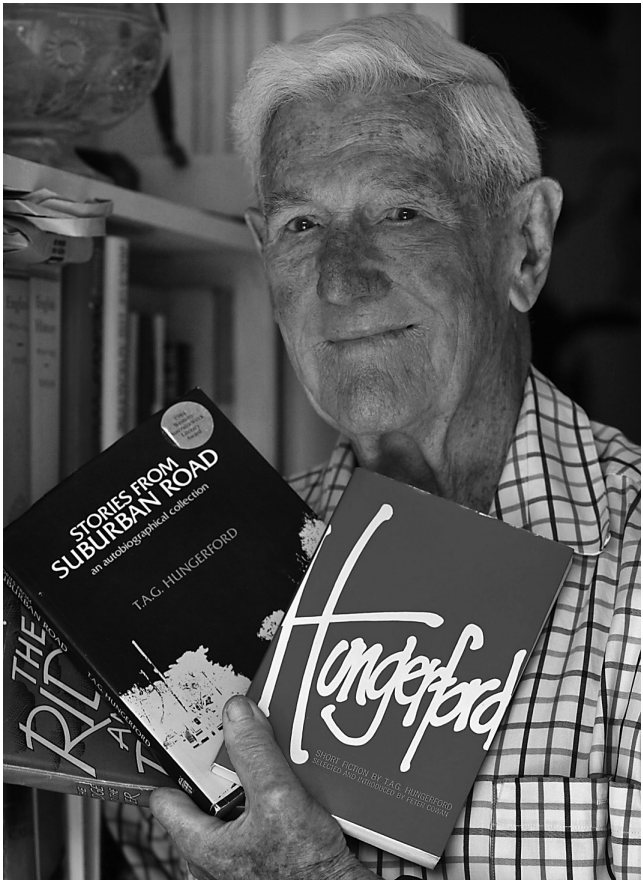
Geoffrey Bolton

For most of my life Tom Hungerford has been a significant and substantial Western Australian. I first came across him as author of *The Ridge and the River* (1952), one of my discoveries during a university education in the late 1940s and early 1950s that in those halcyon days included plenty of time for voracious reading outside the curriculum. Those of us who had been too young to serve in the 1939–45 war learned a good deal from the ex-servicemen and women whom we encountered at university. Serious about their opportunities and given to firm opinions expressed with great good nature, they were an important maturing influence on the rest of us, but were often reticent about their wartime experiences. After reading *The Ridge and the River* we could begin to understand.

Throughout his later life and work Tom Hungerford made a major contribution in helping Western Australians to define their sense of identity in a rapidly changing world. Deftly and precisely in *Stories from the Suburban Road* (1983) he delineated the overgrown country town that was the Perth in which the older generation grew up. This was a world where children walked to school and played hopscotch and French cricket in the street and got to know the local shopkeepers

and Chinese market gardeners. Men travelled to work and women went to the Perth shops by tram, and on Friday evening husbands brought home their pay packets so that their wives could carefully reckon the next week's budget.

Tom Hungerford knew the sights, the smells, the ways in which people interacted with one another in this world we have lost, although, as a North Perth boy, I am bound to take issue with the South Perth myth in Tom's writing suggesting that we were a lot of 'lairs' on our side of the river. Perhaps he was thinking of Highgate.



TAG Hungerford. Reproduced with kind permission of *The West Australian* ©

Beyond his accurately etched picture of the local scene there were bigger themes: change and mutability and the gradual fading of the insights of childhood and youth. He not only described the character of the old Western Australia, he embodied the best of it.

Not that he was representative of a type. He was always a cat who walked by himself, perhaps driven by a disdain for compromise and bullshit, perhaps finding solitude essential to creativity. He could be cantankerous but enjoyed the company of men and women with whom he could share good talk and sometimes listen. Everything to which he turned his hand was marked by a passion for good craftsmanship, whether it involved writing, or cooking, or the leadership of men in war. His was a character of integrity and generosity.

Writing a few years ago about Tom Hungerford, I found myself haunted by lines originally written by the elderly William Butler Yeats' in 'To a Young Beauty':

There's not a fool may call me friend,
And I may sup at journey's end
With Landor and with Donne.

There would be a welcome for Tom Hungerford in that company.

Unfinished *Epistolary* Biographies

Sampurna Chattarji

My father died when I was sixteen
By sixteen I could have already had babies
for eight uncomprehending years.
I didn't know, when it arrived,
that they called it the curse.
When my brother was killed I was eighteen
At eighteen I was a prude, loved by a girl-
woman twice my size, who cried when I was
harsh and told me my nipples smelled of milk.
I didn't know, then, of islands or poets.
All I knew was uncomprehending blood.

The fact that you think of me when you are sad means
nothing. Except ravens and blue lips. The corner of a mouth
where a blister is beginning. A bowl filled with steam
and a single fish-head. A goat being tethered to a stake,
and two kids, their legs still unsteady beneath them.

But even in my heart I am sardonic and never innocent.
What do you know about hearts? Tell me.
I am guilty of this barefaced love.
Houses burn where you once lived.
Men dive into streams.
You tell me nothing so I imagine
everything, starting from the day you were born.

My sojourn there would be called 'Death in the Tropics'!
Triste, your fear of this hot country I live in.
We have ways to combat the excess of sun,
we stay indoors, eat iced fruit, red and golden,
we spray water on chiks* and let the breeze
turn wet around our necks. Our mothers
dab cologne between their breasts, wear shifts
so transparent we forget they are our mothers
and marvel at their near-perfect bodies.
We, who do not live on the streets, find ways
not to die in the heat. But you will not be tempted.
It is I who must travel to you, or stay,
cursing the weather gods, geography, location,
sucking a hard black stone that will not melt.

Let's hope this is where these strange visitations stop. Be brave.
The first visitation was the tall man with an accent so harsh
I could not sense his gentleness. He looked old. In truth
he was impossibly young.

The second visitation was the stockinged face at midnight,
the one that had, so far, merely mauled my dreams.

* Finely woven bamboo blinds

The third visitation was the extinct bird on the hill
that looked like a lion in repose.

It was at the fourth visitation, of the three consecutive
deaths, that I knew I was besieged.

I composed a telegram. It fell through the air, on deaf ears.
It read, if anyone saw it as it blurred past—

Am afraid. Stop. When will it. Stop. Come quick. Stop.

East

Sampurna Chattarji

She could have been a spy on the fly, a fake on the make.
But no, she was honour-bright, killing rats with her twenty-two.
In a yellow Canary she flew fourteen thousand feet into the blue.

They named babies, lakes and homing pigeons after her.
She wrote, she spoke, she spun. Neither reckless nor complacent,
she let the sun dare her face as she tore her goggles off.

Lady Lindy on a windy night.

It was the trick she'd been practising for years.
How to disappear. She exchanged helmets for leather hats,
she consulted weather gods and fuel gauges,

christened her plane Elektra, made friends with Eleanor, met the father
of flight, Mister Orville Wright, stayed speedy, stayed cool,
stayed smart. Knew when to lighten the load and burden the heart.

She fell off the map, fading like static on the radio.
Miami to Khartoum. Khartoum to Karachi. Karachi to Calcutta.
She fell and fell, landing in a well of rounded tongues.

She never arrived at Howland Island.

Calcutta stilled her, jettisoned her will to fly
around the world. This was home at last. Howrah Bridge
over Howland, any day. She was here to stay.

'We are running North and South,' she said. But it was east, east, east all along, the river, the fish, the curving blade of the knife, the other life bright and red and quick as she took it into her hands.

Afterdeath

In which texts by Edwin Morgan (1920–2010) and José Saramago (1922–2010) speak to each other

Sampurna Chattarji

1.

It is opening night at Paolozzi's crashed car exhibition.
But no one came into the lounge, usually the scene of so much traffic.

Orange lips. Thunder. A moth on the damask.
The best words are those that reveal nothing.

We come in peace from the third planet.
Which navy, He came on a warship

Afterwards the sun shone on seven rice shoots and a black tree.
Did you know that the palm tree is not a tree.

i am, horse
unhorse, me
Lydia, her breasts and belly exposed

A nun, visiting Istanbul, sends me a postcard,
the colour of ashes, the print blurred.

His muscles learn to think
I don't give a damn for death

2.

There was a considerable difference in their ages
The old old old old particle/smiled.

He simply said, I am an angel,
The Vixen of Teumessus, red-haired rager,

Delirious, bumping into everything in sight,
I will take all the black ice of Lanarkshire

An endless tale of iron and blood
granite jasper topaz boulder dolomite

Much has been said about life's coincidences
Electrified, bewildered consciousness!

Don't speak of things you know nothing about
Man is a fool

3.

Oh the sheer power of that witch, that bitch
Thank you for cleaning my wounds
Sometimes you grin very wide
Nibbling the damp grass.

4.

My armour is heavy, I must take it off.
Fold his arms so that his hands are in his armpits

Was. Was. Was fore. Was before.
You must choose a sheep.

It was I who drove the camel through the needle's eye.
Footprint by footprint,

Let us gather in the dark
I'll tell you everything

And this

Sampurna Chattarji

And this will be the hollow tree, the stricken stone to which you speak.
And this the wall on which the blue sickle, the red hammer will break.
This man, his legs useless, will be the summer evening you remember most.

Goats 4 Sale

Jose Dalisay

'Where are the goats? Have you seen any goats?' Rodney was driving the Galant while Chinito kept an eye out for the goat stands they'd been told could be found along one side of the street. While waiting for the stereo system to be installed, Rodney had developed a hankering for goat meat, and remembered that they were just a few minutes' drive away from where a classmate at the aeronautical school had told him goats were sold any way you wanted them—live, slaughtered and skinned, or even stewed. Rodney and Chinito had argued over the best way to prepare goat and to get the nasty smell out of the animal. Marination in vinegar would do the trick, Chinito swore, over Rodney's theory of rubbing salt, garlic, and pepper into deep cuts in the flesh.

It was past five and the sun was beginning to cast long shadows from the trees that lined the avenue. Everything seemed awash in a benign yellow, as though, for that one moment, whatever the sunlight touched was precious and noble, including the roach-like jeepneys that belched foul smoke and stopped to disgorge their litter in the middle of the road without bothering to park. The people who stepped out of them, haloed in backlight, were no longer just

messengers bearing parcels and housewives lugging groceries or even pickpockets slinking away into oblivion, but creatures gilded into citizenship by the sun's generosity; everything was part of a one. The light reached a crudely lettered sign nailed onto a tree, saying 'GOATS 4 SALE', and Chinito yelled and pointed it out so Rodney could brake and swerve in time without having the Petron tanker behind them crash into Joel.

Two other vehicles had parked before them at the goat stand—a stainless-steel jeep into which a father and his son were loading white plastic bags whose deep red shadows, wet and bulging, said 'fresh goat meat'; in the blue Toyota Land Cruiser behind them, a man in a golfer's outfit had stepped out to speak to the goat dealer but his wife stayed in the passenger seat, looking in the other direction much like Joel had done in the car.

The stand was no more than a shack on an empty lot which the dealer and his family had taken over for their thriving business; one wall of the shack was a faded Pepsi-Cola sign sporting the old swirl bottlecap, the size of which suggested a huge billboard that had likely crashed during a typhoon and had been dragged over to the lot to serve a more immediate purpose. A girl of about three peered out of a window in the shack, her eyes bright as marbles, a pink finger in her mouth; some movement behind her suggested other occupants, very likely her mother and at least one more child. Whoever was in there was cooking in the back, from where smoke curled up over the shack and its roof, which had been battened down by old tires. The smoke was greasy, and tiny black flakes of soot flew in lazy circles in the air. Joel began to understand what the strange smells that had surged into the car when he pulled the window down were: burning hair, drying blood, and a hint of ginger, or was it lemongrass?

The Land Cruiser sped off and Rodney and Chinito took their places before the dealer—a big man with a Buddha's belly draped by a Chicago Bulls 23 shirt, denim shorts, and double-vision eyeglasses with thick black frames, a cigarette in one hand and a cleaver in the other. Joel stayed in the car, but looking out he saw the dealer's wife

tending to a cauldron of meat, her brow wet and shiny with the steam rising from her cooking. The little girl in the window now appeared at her side, gnawing at what might have been a rib left over from their midday meal. At the back of the lot, a boy of about ten was stacking firewood into a pile, wood that had been salvaged from the floors and posts of demolished houses.

Near that wood pile stood a gathering of goats—at least eight of them, of various ages and sizes, in colours that ranged from glossy black to a delicate brown approaching mustard—all tethered, several to a side so that they faced each other, to an iron railing that their owner had fashioned out of the headrest of an old bed and had stuck deep into the ground. The space between them was littered with dry grass on which two or three goats munched listlessly; behind the goats the earth was dark with their stool, which shone like black pearls.

Except for a slender kid that clung to its mother's haunch, it was impossible to tell if the goats were of one family, if they had been raised together on that lot, or if they had been delivered there from other farms and backlots in Bulacan or Cavite, to be killed and sold on retail in the heart of the city. Joel had failed to notice them immediately because they had been keeping quietly to themselves. They were wide-eyed and skittish, their neck muscles throbbing, but they were not bleating wildly, as though silence and stillness would render them invisible. The bones and entrails of goats that had fed at the same trough that morning attracted flies in green pails just a few feet away, beside plastic jerrycans of water trucked in from elsewhere. Behind the smoke and the steam of her cooking, the dealer's wife flayed a leg expertly on a small table, tossing strips of flesh into the catchment of a weighing scale suspended from a post of the shack itself.

'Just two kilos, *manong*,' Rodney was telling the dealer. 'We can't finish a whole goat, there's only three of us to eat everything.'

'It's his birthday,' Chinito added. 'Give him a good price for his birthday.'

'Two or five kilos, it'll still be one-twenty-five. OK, take the five kilos and I'll give it for one-twenty. You'll never get it this fresh, at that price, even if you go to Muñoz or Nepa-Q-Mart.'

'Three kilos, one twenty-five, but throw in some guts for *papaitan*—'

The dealer took a drag from his cigarette and blew the smoke out of the left side of his mouth, like he was putting on a show. And then he said, 'OK, OK. I want you boys to have your fun. You'll need some bile as well for the *papaitan*. Just add fifty pesos for everything extra, OK?'

Rodney moaned, 'Oh, *manong*—'

'It's OK, *manong*, just wrap everything up. I'll take care of it,' Chinito told Rodney. 'Just take care of the drinks.'

'No problem!' Rodney's dad's bar was stocked with all kinds of drinks, from German rieslings, Belgian beer, and Chinese *mao tai* to exotic Irish whiskeys that his friends and associates dropped off every Christmas as tokens of their highest consideration. The Commodore himself was a man of moderation, a light drinker who nodded off after three or four beers. He kept the wines and liquors for show, and the liquid had gone milky and silted in some bottles. Rodney tapped into this trove, knowing that many more unopened bottles of Johnnie Walker and Chivas Regal resided in the cabinets, and that his father wouldn't even know what he was missing for as long as the bar looked full, prepared to serve a shipload of thirsty sailors.

'Give me a minute,' said the dealer. 'Enchong!' he called out to his son. 'Go get some guts and some bile for *papaitan*!' And then he joined his wife at the weighing scale, holding up three stubby fingers. 'Three kilos, chopped.' The little girl ran up to him and he mussed her hair. 'You eat too much. Someone will eat you if you get too fat.'

Joel had stepped out of the car to get some air, although the air he now breathed in could only have been more noxious, heavy with traffic gases, stale blood, and citric condiments. As if to overcome these smells, he tapped Chinito for a cigarette; he didn't smoke that much, and had yet to settle on a brand and buy his own packs, but

now and then he felt the urge to spike his nerves with nicotine, either to calm them down or in anticipation of something dramatic.

He saw her across the street, standing beneath a tree just like the one he was leaning on now, the one with the 'GOATS 4 SALE' sign. She looked like she could have been anywhere between fifteen and twenty—very likely fifteen trying to look like twenty, the foal-like slenderness of the younger girl merely exaggerated by the ridiculously heavy makeup of the older one, especially around the eyes. Even from his distance, Joel wondered if the dark circles she affected were natural or painted on, or caused by sleeplessness or by some other injury. Her jet black hair fell past her shoulders, cut straight across her eyebrows. She wore what might have been confused for a school uniform, with a cream long-sleeved top, a short green plaid skirt, and tall black socks that accentuated the window of her thighs. Slung across her shoulder was a brown leatherette bag, of a size that might have carried a textbook or two, but it looked slack and almost empty. Joel looked up from her bag and saw her looking at him, and immediately he looked away, embarrassed to have been caught staring. A red Nissan Sentra pulled up between them, just a little past her, and she ran over quickly to speak with the driver, who seemed to be asking questions. She bent over through the open window on the passenger's side, and Joel thought he saw the driver—a man in his fifties or even older—telling her something unpleasant, causing her to recoil as if a snake or a rabid dog had bared its fangs at her. The man said something more but she stomped away and stood behind the tree, her tree, which was too young and narrow to hide her, her arms crossed in annoyed defiance. And then the Nissan drove off, and once again Joel saw her looking in his direction, and this time their stares held, as if to say, I saw that, I know you did and so what, But I don't know what happened back there, Oh come on, Yes I don't, So nothing happened, But something did, And again so what, Who are you?

'Do you like her?' Rodney had snuck up behind Joel. Chinito was paying the goat dealer for their purchase which he was stuffing into

two plastic bags. The boiled intestines, which were to be mixed in with the bile for the bitter dish that Filipino goat fanciers craved, formed brown bubbles in the plastic. Joel had cringed at the mere thought of *papaitan*; he had seen it served in one party or other but had never brought it to his mouth, although he was open to the suggestion that there was always a first time.

'Huh?'

'That girl. Do you want her?' Rodney put his arm around Joel, angling him even more sharply in her direction, so there could be no question about who and what he meant. She pretended to look away and brought the bag up to her chest. A vacant taxicab and a couple of jeepneys passed by on the other side but she took no notice of them. And now and then she glanced back at Joel, on whose shoulder Rodney's arm felt heavier by the second.

'I think she's waiting for—someone, something—'

'She's waiting for you, little brother. Or someone like you, so it might as well be you. I'll bet you'd be her *buena mano*, her first one for the day. And hey, she'd be your *buena mano*, too!' Rodney laughed. The girl was looking at the two of them now, sizing them up to see who was likely to be the one to make the call. Chinito turned toward her; even the goat dealer, the boys' change from a five-hundred-peso bill still in his left hand, looked up to see what was catching his customers' eye.

'She's a new one,' he said, counting out the change. 'Hasn't been there four days. Starts early because the real pros will be coming soon and she's going to have to find another tree, or a pimp, if she wants to keep working.'

'So she's not a real pro?' Joel asked, hopefully.

'Maybe not last week, but she is, now!' said the dealer, handing over three limp bills and loose change to Chinito. 'The cops already picked her up, once, the other day, and she was back in two hours, so you know they didn't give her a free ride home.' The dealer chuckled and his eyes looked even smaller through the frames of his glasses. He reminded Joel of a big rock in the bottom of the ocean that sharks,

whales, and even shrimp passed by without giving it a second thought.

'I wonder how much she charges,' said Rodney.

Another car with two boys in front and three girls in the back stopped beneath the dealer's sign and the man waved at the driver, who was a repeat customer. Before walking over to his new friends, the dealer turned to Rodney and said, 'Maybe five kilos of goat meat?'

A World of Indian Poets—an interview with Jeet Thayil

John Mateer

In an interview conducted by email between Perth and Dubai, John Mateer questions poet and musician Jeet Thayil on the process of compiling *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*, the first major anthology of its kind.

Jeet, let's begin by talking about the origin of this anthology you've edited The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets*. Published by Bloodaxe Books in the UK in association with* Fulcrum: An Annual of Poetry and Poetics *in the US, this seems to me the first substantial anthology of its kind. Am I right in thinking there were no precedents for this aside from the Oxford India anthology* Twelve Modern Indian Poets *edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra? And what prompted you to undertake what must have been a massive task?*

There were no precedents for the simple reason that it was an insanely ambitious project. Arvind's anthology was exactly the kind of enterprise I wanted to offset, because twelve seemed to me

too small and arbitrary a number to represent the world of Indian poetry. I looked at more than a hundred poets and narrowed it down to seventy-two. I wanted to include everybody worth including, whatever their politics, however far-flung the cliques they located themselves in, poets who had never appeared in the same volume, who may have been unaware that they shared, at the very least, a familial resemblance. I wanted to do it because it had not been done before and it seemed to me an obvious and necessary undertaking. And mostly I wanted to do it because my friend Philip Nikolayev, the editor of *Fulcrum*, asked me to.

Was it easy to access the material you surveyed for the selection? In London last year when we discussed this, you told me of someone who helped you, as the person had a tremendous personal collection of Indian poetry …

It was not easy to find the material. Many of these books are out of print, in particular the work of Gopal Honnalgere and Lawrence Bantleman, important Indian poets who have been forgotten. I received bound and photocopied manuscripts, as well as privately printed first editions, from Adil Jussawalla, whose apartment is a kind of archive, with books and manuscripts piled everywhere, including the bed. He has a chronic bronchial complaint because of living with paper and dust for all these years, but whoever said that the pursuit of poetry was not a heroic endeavour?

Your selection included a number of Indian poets whose work has for some time been regarded as the key work of modern Indian poetry in English—foremost among them Nissim Ezekiel, Dom Moraes, Dilip Chitre, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra—as well as a wide range of others, new poets, and poets of Indian background but writing or living elsewhere. Did you have any problems trying to reconcile or integrate such renowned 'modernist' figures with newer names, with poets whose poetics is still very much in the making?

In fact, for me, that may have been one of the sweet spots of what eventually became a three-year ordeal. The 'newer' poets were not so new, they'd all published a book, if not several books, and the youngest among them were born in 1975. The interesting thing was that the canonical Indian poets were often more experimental and modernist than the younger poets. Compare, say, Adil Jussawalla and Tishani Doshi, or Nissim Ezekiel and Ranjit Hoskote.

And was there ever a question as to including or excluding figures on the grounds of their nationality? Quite a few of the poets did end up living outside of India, a good number in the US.

No, that was never a question. I approached the project with the conviction that a poet's location was an anthropological accident. The only grounds for exclusion were the obvious ones. I wanted to suggest that Indian poetry was modern and international in scope. I wanted, particularly, to get away from the perception of the poetry as something precious, stilted and nineteenth-century. In other words, I wanted to escape the Tagorean model. And of course I was subject to my own formalist preferences.

In the case of a poet like David Dabydeen, whose work I was first introduced to at a poetry festival in South Africa, I imagined that he might not really identify as Indian, but rather as someone from the Caribbean diaspora … And then there are the examples of Daljit Nagra who is a 'new-generation Faber poet', and Sujata Bhatt, now living in Germany, a kind of double-exiled English poet …?

David Dabydeen may not identify himself as Indian, but there are Indian obsessions and neuroses evident in his work, particularly the preoccupation with diaspora and the sea. Daljit is new generation but his concerns, at least in his first book, are rooted in the British Indian experience. Sujata lives in Germany but is very much an Indian

poet, and I'm not referring solely to her use of (Gujarati) dialect. My definition of 'Indian poet' for the purposes of this anthology was necessarily wide.

In your own poem 'Malayalam Ghazal':

Listen! Someone's saying a prayer in Malayalam.
He says there's no word for 'despair' in Malayalam.

Sometimes at daybreak you sing a Gujarati garba.
At night you open your hair in Malayalam.

To understand symmetry, understand Kerala.
The longest palindrome is there, in Malayalam.

When you've been too long in the rooms of English,
Open your windows to the fresh air of Malayalam.

Visitors are welcome in The School of Lost Languages.
Someone's endowed a high chair in Malayalam.

I greet you my ancestors, O scholars and linguists.
My father who recites Baudelaire in Malayalam.

Jeet, such drama with the scraps you know.
Write a couplet, if you dare, in Malayalam.

You refer to Baudelaire, as you do in another poem in the anthology. I am interested in the triangulation of literatures you are evoking: English (the language in which you write), French (the language of Baudelaire, whose modernity and romanticism you are alluding to), and the Indian languages that are both alive ('Listen! Someone is saying a prayer in Malaylam … Sometimes at daybreak you sing a Gujarati garba …') and elusive ('…The School of Lost Tongues').

What is your own relation to English here? *What do you then feel regarding English, in your role as anthologist?*

My relationship with English has defined my life in many ways, though the first poems I read, or the first poems that affected me, were translations of Baudelaire. I made my own translations at the age of fourteen or thereabouts. I thought it would be a way of putting my years of French tuition to some use. I don't read or write Malayalam but I understand it—fluently. I was educated in Jesuit schools all over the world, including India, Hong Kong and the United States. I've lived in many cities, too many to list here, and the only source of continuity in all this movement was the English language. My third collection was titled *English* and I identify myself as a citizen of the Republic of English. Needless to say, it's a republic that has little or nothing to do with Britain. It is a notion, an allegiance, the language spoken in your head and in your dreams. And it's a question of intelligibility. In India, particularly, it is a link language, the only way a Bengali and a Malayali, for example, can communicate with each other. It's interesting to me that the Hindiwallahs and other regionalists (who criticise Indian poets for writing in English) fashion their barbs in the very language they abhor.

To return to the issue of key figures in Indian poetry: I knew of the work of more of the poets in this anthology than I imagined I would. Over the years I have heard some of them read—Ezekiel, Sudesh Mishra, Keki Daruwalla—have met some of them in various places, Durban, Iowa, Galle, London—Dabydeen, Mani Rao, Tishani Doshi, Vikram Seth, Nagra, Bhatt—and encountered their books in various libraries and bookshops or their legend—once in San Francisco the poet Michael Palmer described in detail the 'larger than life' antics of Agha Shahid Ali when he lived at Palmer's house. But what most struck me in the anthology were two figures who seem major poets to me, poets new to me, namely Arun Kolatkar and Adil Jussawalla. Could you tell us about them? Are they well regarded in India? It

seems to me that they are almost anti-institutional figures, where someone like Ezekiel was very institutional. Is that right?

Kolatkar and Jussawalla were contemporaries and friends. Kolatkar worked in advertising for many years. At one point he recorded some songs and hoped to be a popstar. He struggled against alcoholism. He lived with his second wife in a tiny room choked with books; if you went to visit you had to step onto the balcony because there was no space in the house. He published one of the great books of Indian verse, *Jejuri*, in 1976, and then published nothing until 2004, the year of his death, when he came out with two substantial collections, and I'm talking only of the work in English. Adil Jussawalla published two books of poetry, the last, *Missing Person*, appeared in 1976, and then he published nothing for thirty-five years, or nothing he deemed worth publishing. He became the title of his last book. It is certainly the longest case of writer's block in Indian poetic history. Dom Moraes's lasted fifteen years, Kolatkar didn't publish in English for twenty-nine years. But Adil beat them all. This year, he, too, has two books ready for publication. *Trying to Say Goodbye* will appear in August and *The Right Kind of Dog* is with publishers. As important as his poetic work is the scholarly and archival work he has done all his life. Without him, there would be no record of many Indian poets. He is a one-man barricade against the encroachments of oblivion.

I believe Kolatkar wrote in two languages—English and Marathi. How common is that? And how do you think that might affect the Indian poet's conception of writing in English?

It is an absolutely unique predicament. As Arvind Krishna Mehrotra has pointed out, much of the work is unique to the language it is written in. In other words, Kolatkar had two independent careers in two languages, with little overlap. He is a kind of Pessoan figure and his true value is only just becoming known. For the Indian poet writing in English he is an indicator of the way forward. Though

his reading was voluminous, his poetry was rooted in the everyday life he saw around him, and that may be the secret of his enduring appeal. *Jejuri* has gone into at least five printings.

Of the newer poets, are there any you would especially like to draw attention to, anyone who you feel is doing something very new or transgressive in the context of Indian poetry?

If I were doing the anthology today, I would include poets such as Siddhartha Bose, who lives in London, Meena Kandaswami, from Chennai, and Monica Modi, who lives somewhere in the United States.

I noted that there only seemed to be one poet who wrote in an openly political or post-colonial way—Arundhathi Subramaniam, whose poem 'To the Welsh Critic Who Doesn't find Me Identifiably Indian' concludes 'Stamp my papers,/lease me a new anxiety./Grant me a visa/to the country of my birth./Teach me how to belong,/the way you do,/on every page of world history.' The anger is palpable, yet rare in your anthology. That tone of reaction is to me recognizable, a post-colonial one, similar to what occurred, though to different effect, in Caribbean, African or even Indonesian poetry of a certain era. How is it that so few other poets here seem to share that anxiety and concern?

This may be a fault of my own selection process. I wanted to make an anthology that would be relevant in two or three decades, when the idea of diaspora and the idea of post-colonialism will be dimmer than they already are. I wanted to make an anthology that would last longer than a moment, though I have no idea if it will, or even if such a goal is realistic.

Meena Alexander, who like you, is of a Syrian Christian background, and also like you familiar with New York, is in her poem 'Indian April' in a kind of dialogue with Allen Ginsberg's experience and

descriptions of India. It reminded me, obliquely, of a poem by the Indonesian Goenawan Mohammad which recounts meeting Ginsberg in New York, in that it does raise the question of how an Indian poet's articulation of India must sit—for the 'Western reader'—in the context of a body of work, like that of the Beat Poets of course, that took up the Exotic East and naturalised aspects of it in the American poetic tradition. Someone like Gary Snyder is read with real respect in Japan, for instance. Could we be at a point where the boundaries between East and West are evaporating?

John, we can only hope.

The Knot

Ankur Betageri

She had a knot instead of a face and inside that knot were many knots. One day I shone the torch on her and expressed my desire to undo the knot.

'You have to undo the knot, otherwise you will neither see nor feel anything.' She didn't understand me for she still had a knot for a face which had many knots inside. She instead threatened me saying quite foolishly:

'You touch me and I will make you disappear!' her voice betrayed a great insecurity.

So I decided to tie her long pony tail to a man who also had a knot for a face. Since both had knot-faces they would understand each other better, I thought. And they would, in time, undo each others' knot, if they thought it was required. But no, their knots tightened, and grew bigger as they walked the labyrinthine streets of the city trying to set up a secure and comfortable home for themselves.

And one fine morning I saw them walking in the park with two children, again, with knot-faces. I found this disturbing. Knots were giving birth to knots, and all the time they were becoming more and more complicated. As I walked past them I heard them speak in a

secretive code language, the language of the knots, which made me flinch involuntarily—so impossibly bigoted and closed was their language.

A few weeks later I saw the lady knot in a department store and confronted her. 'I found a match for you, made you happy and you don't even recognise me when you see me! That day, you and your husband—you just walked past me in the park. And now I see that your children too have knot-faces. What's wrong with you people? Why don't you undo yourselves and find release? And why do you make even your children live the horrible lives of suffocation that you have lived?'

Her knot-face looked at me searchingly and tightened. She picked up a few more things from the table, bought them at the counter, and left the store in a jiffy. I had evidently scared her. But, not in my wildest of dreams had I expected what happened next.

The next morning I spilled the scalding tea on my lips looking at the photo published on the frontpage of the newspaper. It was the photograph of four familiar faces hanging by their necks in a row; two adults and two kids; a middleclass family; around their necks were black knotted ropes, the ropes which had wound around their faces till now as four unspeakably hideous knots.

That evening at the Kalakshetra I was to play the title role of *Hamlet,* one of my favourite characters. I entered the empty green room at five o'clock and standing in front of the mirror, turned on the make up lights. What I saw jolted me out of my senses and kept me trembling throughout the evening: a great, black knot, wound like a turban, stared back at me. After looking at the knot from many angles, and after touching my knot-face and the mirror—and pinching myself—to make sure I was not dreaming—I began to twist and pull at the knot franatically. I banged my head against the wall, poured boiling water over my head, inserted needles and screwdrivers and yanked—all to no avail. I only stopped when I realised that the knot was biting the skin of my face, and a horrible breathless tightness had formed around my neck.

The Earth Mother

Ahila Sambamoorthy

She awakens in her silver tabernacle,
heavy-breasted, round-bellied,
shimmering in the silken threads of her Kanchipuram sari,
nose-jewel flashing in the flames of burning splints.

He is Gopal the Mountain-Holder
with his chorus of divine nymphs
sprung full-blown from Brahma's mind.
On his head he wears the peacock-crown.

Their souls dance. She surrenders,
her limbs languid.

The honey he had made runs in her veins,
creamy milk wets the inside of her thighs
in dazzling love play
until they are both fathomless,
androgenic, defying time and space.

With a hushed prayer, He bows to her bounty and grace.

Stone (for my father)

Ahila Sambamoorthy

In his world lit by a sleep light bulb and yellow walls
Appa is at his wooden shrine
With its pillars of finely wrought carvings

Incense smoulders. Black gleam of polished granite
Garlanded with orange marigolds

Appa bows low in its presence
Touches his temples
Feeds the sacrificial fire
Mantras ring in his ears
Prayers escape from his palms

And so begins and ends each day
God meeting Appa in an embrace
Of elemental stone

Mahashivratri

Ahila Sambamoorthy

She is sweetly composed dusk diaphanous in muslin

Her mahogany hair tumbles down onto ripe breasts

their nipples knotty like the rudraksha seed

A python decked in pure gold swivelling on her oiled ball bearings

tantric songs reverberating in her soul

Bhairava rises in her hot and hard

Dark distant flames engulf her inside and out

Until there is nothing but fire

Bittersweet cocoa

she would melt in his mouth

pure and unspoiled in a sea of swirling heat

that burns her heart

and when she roared …

Shilpa Phadke

Shakuntala Kulkarni—a note from the artist:

'From the mid 1980s the concerns in my work shifted to gender specific issues. My work since then has been an enquiry into the lives of urban women and their spaces, like the home space, work space and cultural and social space within the society which is essentially patriarchal. I observed that objectification, ownership, commodification and hierarchies are still deep rooted within society and surface at various stages, sometimes obviously, sometimes subtly, leading to various kinds of discrimination and violence towards women. As a result, women experience a sense of fear, alienation, anxiety, claustrophobia. At different stages of my art practice, I have addressed some of these issues and the possibility of dealing with them in embodied forms. In the early 1990s, the need to rearrange and stretch my visual language to address these concerns and go into a deeper enquiry, compelled me to shift my works from the two dimensional space of painting and printmaking to the three dimensional sculptural space. At this stage my involvement with the intimate theatre of the 1970s, allowed me the freedom to experiment with time, form and space. I started doing multimedia installations. I was able to blur the

barriers of different languages by using different disciplines. This led to working with moving images. I started using the body as the site of contestation for addressing my concerns. Thus *And when she roared the universe quaked…* is a multimedia work, combining acrylics on canvas, paintings on glass, looped videos and performance.'

And when she roared the universe quaked… complicates our understanding of violence—how do we relate to it when we find it at the centre of a performance, when martial art practices allow us access to techniques to contain it, when movies aestheticise it, and when we find it explosively affecting our daily lives (cities strewn with ripped, wounded, and fragmented bodies)? Shakuntala Kulkarni's new works raise questions about the space that violence occupies in our lives. She revisits rebellious heroines of mythology and reimagines their ways of harnessing violence; and she examines the anger of the modern woman and the challenges it engenders. Everyday fear, suppressed anger, collective memory and feminist struggle implode as Kulkarni's protagonists battle unseen demons, both within and outside the body. The body becomes not just the site of violence, but also its weapon.

Kulkarni's figures repetitively assume positions of defence or enact stances of mounting offensive action. Even as these documents remind us of the ways in which everyday acts of violence against women are normalised, they suggest that at the same time, violence is not merely destructive, it might also be productive. In the Foucauldian paradigm, the exercise of power subjects bodies not to make them passive, but to render them active. Kulkarni's work can then be viewed in this context where in the process of violence; the forces of the body are trained and developed with a view to making them productive. The body then exercises its own power that corresponds to the exercise of power over it.

Four of the six video installations are about playing games—games that Kulkarni played as a young girl but which she now uses as a

metaphor to explore another kind of power-play. Her work speaks to what Kalpana Kannabiran has evocatively called *The Violence of Normal Times*[1]. The video installations titled, 'Is it just a game?' take on the everyday gendered imbalances, sexual harassment and a pervasive sense of anxiety subjecting them to scrutiny. Kulkarni uses her own body as the site for these games self-consciously recalling the games once 'played in innocence'. In one we see her besieged by group of men in black playing Kabbadi that are in retrospect now forcefully reminiscent of the images of two young women being molested in Juhu in Mumbai on New Year's Eve 2008 by a crowd of men that were splashed on the front pages of newspapers. In another, she invokes the now almost mundane cat-calls that women have to negotiate in public space, where her blindfolded protagonist encounters whistles and jeers. The blindfold subtly but effectively

Shakuntala Kulkarni 'Unsung Epics 111', 6½ ft x 3½ ft, fabric, fabric paint, from her work 'and when she roared the universe quaked', 2008.

conveys the idea that 'good women' do not *look back* but pretend not to be able to see.

Kulkarni engages these not from the passive position of the helpless victim but as acts of strategy, negotiation and agency. The other video installation 'the role I would love to play: messiah' seems to underscore this, as Kulkarni uses Aikido to mount her retaliation. While in conversation with Kulkarni about her work, she points out to me that these martial arts aim not to decimate the opponent but to respond as a respectful gesture that demonstrates a strong intent that is tempered with compassion.

Kulkarni's concern with pain as a continuum is reflected in her smaller works, which contend with the embodied woman often framed, connected, linked by the metaphor of the umbilical chord. These glass paintings are displayed as an extended ceiling installation from which the show takes its title, *And when she roared the universe quaked...* The viewing of these paintings creates a space of intimacy where the viewer-subject engages the images in a mirror. In the handheld mirror, the viewer confronts the bleeding, wounded, productive, reproductive, warrior like women who defy the boundaries of their bodies even as s/he might see her own face peering at the edges of the frame. This action acts to subvert possibilities for the viewer to distance herself demanding that s/he locate herself in relation to them.

Kulkarni unlike many younger artists does not shy away from the label 'feminist', but self-consciously engages the larger artistic practices where performance and video have become important media to explore women's lives, celebrate the body's rhythms and pains, build dynamic narratives of gendered experience, and explore relationships between the body as performing agent and the subject of action and the body as site of spectacle. Her works do not aestheticise violence but nor do they assume a moral position on it. Violence and the gendered experience and the enactment of it are closely examined with an awareness and empathy that is far from apolitical.

The attempt is not to neatly ameliorate past traumas or fashionably invoke 'feminine power' but to examine the enabling possibilities

of violence, which include its power to transform and upturn existing hierarchies of power. Kulkarni's protagonists frequently 'perform violence' but this gendered enactment nonetheless evades ritualisation, suggesting that these almost stylised acts produce disruptions, evasions and ultimately resistance. Without essentialising women as inherently nurturing and without forgetting that women are also capable of premeditated and brutal violence, these works make it possible for us to reconfigure existing *lines of control* that contain women into neat defined categories and offer spaces to reimagine our place in the world and to reinvent ourselves.

Shakuntala Kulkarni 'Unsung Epics 1X', 6½ ft x 3½ ft, fabric, fabric paint, from her work 'and when she roared the universe quaked', 2008.

Notes:

1 Kannabiran, Kalpana (ed.), 2005. *The Violence of Normal Times: Essays on Women's Lived Realities*, New Delhi: Women Unlimited

Traumatic Materialism: Info-flows, Bodies and Intersections in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*

Pramod K. Nayar

William Gibson, the founding figure of cyberpunk fiction, has turned ethical. Moving beyond the early hagiography of information-flows, cyborg minds and human-machine assemblages in works like *Neuromancer* (1984), Gibson now probes the other roles, consequences and necessities of information. *Pattern Recognition* (2003, hereafter *PT*), at one level, is a praise-song for viral marketing and the hyper-connected consumer lifestyle of the digital age. Yet, at another level, as I shall demonstrate in this essay, it also explores the worrying linkages between the materiality of bodies and the supposed 'immateriality' of information. Gibson moves, this essay argues, from info-flows of consumer signage to the corpo-realisation of info-flows and finally the traumatic materialism of info-flows.

Info-flows and Consumer Signage

Gibson's novel deals with a specific kind of information flow—advertising and signage—about objects, if not the objects themselves. That is, it is not only material products and consumer goods but the incessant flow of images *of* products and goods that constitute the

'aestheticised' postmodern lifestyle (Featherstone 68). The Gibsonian world exemplifies this endless proliferation of signs and images which produces, in Featherstone's reading, a 'de-auraticisation of art, and an aesthetics of desire, sensation and immediacy' (69). Advertising is of course at the centre of this process of inducing desire for, as Jean Baudrillard puts it:

> advertising is not simply an adjunct to the system of objects; it cannot be detached therefrom, nor can it be restricted to its 'proper' function … Advertising is now an irremovable aspect of the system of objects precisely by virtue of its disproportionateness. (178)

Bigend echoes Baudrillard when he says: 'far more creativity, today, goes into the marketing of products than into the products themselves' (67). And this marketing is about signage that generates the desire, sensation and immediacy, an excessive flow of signs that generates its own aesthetic, what I have elsewhere identified as Gibson's sublime (Nayar).

Cayce Pollard's first walk in London offers her 'a mountainside of Tommy [Hilfiger] coming down her head' (17). Her thoughts on encountering this excessive signage are pure Baudrillardian:

> This stuff is simulacra of simulacra of simulacra. A diluted tincture of Ralph Lauren, who had himself diluted the glory days of Brooks Brothers, who themselves had stepped on the product of Jermyn Street and Savile Row … But Tommy surely is the null point … There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event-horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul … but suspects … that this in fact is what accounts for his long ubiquity. (17–18)

Gibson is here speaking of the Baudrillardian simulacra, the endless flow of signs that constitute a dream-world, but also a reality. Thus, as Cayce walks through London she remembers the streets for the *brands*

there: a Laura Ashley here, a Dean and Dulca store there (18–19). To negotiate the streets is to traverse a terrain of signs more than goods, icons rather than objects. London for Cayce is more a collection of ubiquitous, derivative but no less powerful signage than a museum or store. In other words, what we see is a personalised geography in terms of a spatialised memory of signs and brands. The experience is repeated in Japan where, when Cayce stands at her hotel window in Tokyo, she sees a skyline that is exclusively signage:

> A remarkably virtual-looking skyline, a floating jumble of electric Lego … Logos of corporations she doesn't even recognise … She remembers this now from previous visits, and also the way certain labels are mysteriously recontextualised here … (127)

In Moscow she sees, simply, 'huge advertising banners … slung across the street, and billboards top most buildings' (270), and a McDonald's (269). Cities here lose their historical and cultural specificity as ubiquitous, globally recognisable signs take over the landscape due to their embeddedness in info-flows. Hence Cayce thinks of these cities as 'mirror-worlds.'

The absence of signage, primarily of brands, trademarks and logos means that identification is ruled out. In what is an ironic comment on the aestheticised postmodern lifestyle, Gibson records Cayce's reactions to the footage (the mysterious, pared down footage that is uploaded from an unknown source and is now followed by fans worldwide):

> They [the couple in the footage] are dressed as they always have been dressed in clothing Cayce has posted on extensively, fascinated by its timelessness, something she knows and understands. The difficulty of that. Hairstyles too.
>
> He might be a sailor, stepping onto a submarine in 1914, or a jazz musician entering a club in 1957. There is a lack of evidence, an absence of stylistic cues … The architecture of padding in a woman's coat should yield possible periods, particularly decades,

> but there has been no agreement…The one hundred and thirty-four previously discovered fragments…have yielded no period… (23–4)

Gibson, I propose, offers a counter-flow to this incessant sign-flow in the account of the footage. In a world where people's cognitive abilities are conditioned by their exposure to signs and brands the footage makes little, or maximum, sense because it *lacks* identifiable signage. It mesmerises and fascinates *because* the brands and their temporal frames in the segments cannot be decoded. Thus, the info-flow of consumer culture is countered by an equally powerful flow, but one whose icons, signs and brands generate dreamscapes that are characterised, as Cayce terms it, by 'timelessness' (23). She refers to the footage as 'ghostnarratives', with 'shadowy and determined lives of their own' (24). There is no 'particular narrative direction' either (24). And it is this atemporal, post-geographic, beyond-branding footage that itself becomes a cult consumer product. A non-brandable sign becomes a brand.

In the Gibsonian world, the hyperreal of signs is countered by the equally powerful flow of signs, of the curiously non-indexical, non-identifiable signs of the footage. It is the anonymity of the footage's moments (they are very brief, some lasting only about fifty seconds) that renders it so intense. I have already noted that Cayce's negotiation of London is premised on the recognition of the signage on the streets. I advance one more argument here. A city mapped in terms of signs, recognised for its geography of logos and trademarks, is *striated* space. The footage, in contrast, which intersects with the lives of its followers like Cayce, is *smooth* space (I am invoking here the distinction from Deleuze and Guattari). Striated spaces in London are homogenised and organised, for Cayce, around brands and logos. Signs systematise this space. The footage is non-formal, with little visual clues as to period, geography or sequence, as noted above, thus making the world of cyberspace (here represented by the footage disseminated by the www) a smooth space.

The two spaces of course intersect, given the nature of existence in the late twentieth century, for cyberspace, or the footage, is not 'outside' us, it *constitutes* us, as Cayce admits:

> It is a way now, approximately, of being at home. The forum ['F:F:F', of fans of the footage] has become one of the most consistent places in her life, like a familiar café that exists somehow outside of geography and beyond time zones. (4)

The smooth, non-formal space of the footage will not be interpreted, will not be appropriated and will not be sequenced into a linear narrative (striated spaces, Deleuze and Guattari tell us, are created out of the anxiety of nomadism and free-flows, and often confront the amorphous smooth space, seeking to control it). The flow of the footage, its consumption across the world (its fans hail from widely different countries) suggests a post-geographic condition:

> The forum will be going crazy, the first posts depending on time zones, history of proliferation, where the segment surfaced. It will prove impossible to trace, either uploaded via a temporary e-mail address, often from a borrowed IP, sometimes via a temporary cell phone number, or through some anonymiser. (21)

Later, examining the footage for possible patterns, Cayce and others see geographic maps emerging: 'she has no reason to believe this is the representation of any island, actual or imaginary. It might be a T-shaped segment extracted from some larger map…' (170). It is merely signage, atemporal and post-geographic, and thus akin to postmodern geographic states. Postmodern cities, as David Clarke's work persuasively argues, are capitalist cities but which are given over to, and defined by hyper-consumption, and especially the circulation and consumption of *signs*. What Gibson does is to first offer us this post-geography, linked only by signs, logos and images that have little to do with the immediate locale/locality. The footage

too is part of this postmodernisation of locality, a creation of a smooth space as opposed to a striated, ordered one.

The creation of a forum to interpret the footage is the attempt to regulate its dissemination (the release of the footage, as we discover towards the end, is also regulated, but its consumption cannot be, given the nature of digital cultures today). The flaming that occurs on the forum's website about what the footage means suggests the anxiety over its meanings (46). Thus Bigend speculates: '[they are uploaded] very carefully, intending to provide the illusion of randomness' (64). Fans and computer specialists detect 'a geography of sorts, and possibly…a formal order' (170).

Info-flows and their Corpo-realisation

However, at no point in time can we see these signs as *only* simulacra or dreamscapes. These signs constitute the material, the visceral and the real. It is geography, matter and the real. This intersection of the hyperreal world of signs with concrete reality is what we can think of as the materialisation of immaterial info-flows. This materialisation of signage is what Cayce works at and for. In Gibson, I propose, we can see a corpo-realisation (a portmanteau term to suggest the centrality of the corporeal in 'realising,' 'making real,' but also of 'recognition') of the immaterial where the materialisation of info-flows demands a *body.* This posthuman condition, which Katherine Hayles describes as 'an envisioning of the human as information-processing machines with fundamental similarities to other kinds of information-processing machines, especially intelligent computers' (246), is characterisable as an assemblage, of the organic body with the flows of information around it.

Info-flows are materially produced through a mix of human and non-human actors where the possibility of action is embodied as both territory and 'bodily' locations. These bodily locations are 'knowing locations' (John Law and Kevin Hetherington, cited in Flusty 151), sites at which data is gathered, analysed and acted upon, points of

passage or junctions from where knowledge, sociality and global flows emanate (Flusty 151). This is the 'materialisation' or, more accurately, 'corpo-realisation' of info-flows that is the next move in Gibson's novel.

Cayce's father had identified a condition—apophenia—abio-medical, psycho-cognitive condition of being able to see patterns in randomness, resulting in 'spontaneous perceptions of connections and meaningfulness in unrelated things' (115). Apophenic Cayce can immerse herself into the endless flow of signs in order to detect emerging patterns. She works, therefore, as a 'coolhunter.' She says: 'manufacturers use me to keep track of street fashion…What I do is pattern recognition. I try to recognise a pattern before anybody else does' (86). There is a simultaneity of two processes at work in this info-flow around Cayce.

The first process is the materialisation of information. Cayce lives inside the flow of signs (or information), and yet remains outside it. She detects patterns within the flow of signs because *she* recognises the meanings of these signs. She surveys and predicts brands and logos. Cayce can read, literally, the signs (logos, trademarks) of the future in the ebb and flow of signage around her. That is, she uncovers a pattern within the apparent free-flowing and randomised bits of info around her. It is Cayce's mind, taking in and processing the info through her senses, that signals future trends. Thus we can argue that Cayce gives *form* to abstract trends, *materialises* signs, logos and 'cool'. In similar fashion the signs and future trends remain 'immaterial' in the sense they are still abstract. What Cayce does is explained this way: 'I point a commodifier at it. It gets productised. Turned into units. Marketed' (86). The trend or fashion is the renewed flow of info through the Cayce-junction—the cumulative and tangible result of non-human (immaterial) info and human actors coming together.

The process of materialisation of information requires a body, specifically, Cayce's material, corporeal body. It is through Cayce's sensory appropriation and interpretation of the abstract signage that logos and products are *made*. That is, it is entirely Cayce's

interpretation that converts the sign into a marketable commodity, an object. Consumer products do not demand mere signage, they demand a corpo-realization. For this to happen, ironically, Cayce has to be steeped in the signage. Signage is everted, it envelops her, even as she exists somewhere between the materiality of her body and the 'immaterial' signage. In a sense, then, the Cayce body is *de-materialised* when it becomes a part of the signage and *rematerialised* when her body becomes the means of actualising the sign. Pattern recognition, then, is the intersection of the human body with the flow of information.

A second instantiation of this intersection is the process of viral marketing. Magda, who works at viral marketing, describes her job this way: '[I] go to clubs and wine bars and chat people up. While I'm at it, I mention a client's product, of course favourably. I try to attract attention while I'm doing it' (84). The listeners at this conversation go away and don't necessarily buy the product but what they do is 'recycle the information. They use it to try to impress the next person they meet' (85). What Gibson is presenting here is a very different marketing mode, one which relies on WOM (word-of-mouth) transmission of information. People remain the nodes in this transmission. They are the conduits through which information flows. The product is constituted as a set of signs transmitted *through* bodies hired to do the job.

Now that we have established that Gibson's novel aligns the corporeal with the sign-flow, the flows of immaterial information with the material, it remains for us to explore a distinctive instance of this intersection in the novel.

Traumatic Materialism and Info-flows

Immaterial info-flows that create smooth space demand bodies, embodiment and corpo-realisation. What Gibson does is to take the body as the site of this intersection of material and immaterial, but shows the body as traumatised by this intersection, what I

term the traumatic materiality of info-flows. There are three crucial intersections of data and flesh in *PT*.

Let us take Cayce Pollard first. A 'coolhunter' who can detect patterns in street fashion and future trends, she is allergic to labels and logos of any kind:

> What people take to for relentless minimalism is a side effect of too much exposure to the reactor-cores of fashion… She is, literally, allergic to fashion. She can only tolerate things that could have been worn, to a general lack of comment, during any year between 1945 and 2000. She's a design-free zone, a one-woman school of anti…(8)

She navigates London's ubiquitous and derivative signage but these still affect her viscerally when she wears them or comes into contact with them. She is immersed in signage and its ubiquitous flows, but she is 'outside' it as well because of her 'talents…allergies…tame pathologies' (65). Apophenic Cayce can intuitively detect patterns, materialise them through her sensorium, but her body cannot assimilate them at all. To be consumed, an object must first become a sign, says Baudrillard (218) but, as Gibson will demonstrate, the sign works when cognitively (i.e., through the corporeal sensorium) perceived.

Signage brings home to Cayce that she is a vulnerable body as well, hers is a body that has to stay devoid of signage. 'She's gone to Harvey Nichols and gotten sick', we are told (17). Michelin Man logos make her throw up and want to scream (97, 98). Through these panic reactions the Cayce body responds, materially, to immaterial signs. She is the traumatic materialism of the signifier. Gibson thus complicates the body-signage, material-immaterial binaries by showing how they merge, often to disastrous results.

It is the absence of any confirmatory information about her father's fate that haunts Cayce. This marks the second intersection of information and the corporeal in its traumatic materialism. We are told of the quest for particular kinds of information—of the death of

Win Pollard—in the great flow of info around 9/11. Cayce's mother, now part of a commune, finds this information in the general buzz around the event. She writes to Cayce about it:

> These four ambient segments were accidentally recorded by a CCNY anthropology student making a verbal survey of missing-person posters and other signs… We've found this particular tape to be remarkably rich…[in voices, supposedly from the people who died on 9/11]…and have recovered several dozen messages by a variety of methods…Messages of this sort do not yield very easily to conventional studio techniques; those on the other side [i.e., the dead] are best able to modulate those aspects of a recording that we ordinarily think of as 'noise'…(184)

Cayce's mother is proposing a flow of info from the dead, in a language (signs) that we often dismiss as 'noise.'

Win Pollard, Cayce's father, had 'left remarkably few full-face images' and in the one that does exist he had been 'mistaken for the younger William S. Burroughs' (186).[1] In the absence of information, Cayce is unable to mourn for him. If mourning requires a topos (Derrida 111), it also requires confirmation of death, in the form of information, or it would become 'interminable mourning' (111). Here the absence of information functions as a traumatic signifier of an event without a frame of reference, a limit or even a temporal location. 9/11 itself, as David Simpson has argued, is an event outside of space and time due to its iconic iterability, its trans-temporal state unrestricted by either the place of NYC or the day/date of September 11. For, as Derrida put it:

> It is if I were content to say that what is terrible about 'September 11', what remains 'infinite' in this wound, is that we do not know what it is and so do not know how to describe, identify, or even name it… We are talking about a trauma, and thus an event, whose temporality proceeds neither from the now that is present nor

> from the present that is past but from an im-presentable present to come. (Borradori 94–97)

For Cayce, 9/11 is all around her, but this free-floating signifier does not cohere into a material condition—the material condition embodied in her father's death. That he is only 'missing' suggests that there is no corporeal body to the info around/about him. The traumatic materialism of 9/11 here is the dematerialisation of Win Pollard, his death a sign without a body and hence without personal signification for Cayce except as a loss.

The third instance of the linkage between material body and immaterial information is the case of the footage producer, Nora. The material body behind the info-flow that is the footage is hinted at early in the novel when people attribute it to the 'virtual hand of some secretive and unknown genius' (47).

Nora, the maimed twin, is the one who produces the footage by editing three short films she had made when at college. Nora survives, more a vegetable than a human, with shrapnel in her brain. The entire account of the production of the footage reinforces the centrality of consciousness—embodied consciousness—to info-flows. The first comments made by Stella, the other twin, to Cayce gestures at the unbelievable but undeniable link between bodily trauma and digital art:

> The last fragment [of the bomb that killed the twins' parents]. It rests between the lobes, in some terrible way. It cannot be moved. Risk is too great… But then she notices the screen… When she looked at those images, she focused. When the images were taken away, she began to die again. (288–9)

Nora survives because she can edit her film, her eyes focus only on the screen. It is in the endless circulation of images—info-flows, signage—that she exists. She *is* the film she makes, in an extreme instance of eversion.[2]

Out of the injury in her head comes the minimalist footage that captures the world's imagination. Gibson builds on the link between bodily trauma and information later:

> Her consciousness, Cayce understands, somehow bounded up by or bound to the T-shaped fragment in her brain… And from it, and from her other wounds, there now emerged, accompanied by the patient and regular clicking of her mouse, the footage… the headwaters of the digital Nile… It is here, in the languid yet precise moves of a woman's pale hand. In the faint click of image-capture. In the eyes truly present when focused on this screen.
>
> Only the wound, speaking wordlessly in the dark. (305)

It is the wound that speaks to the world. In this, the climactic moments of the tale, Gibson reinforces the (tragically) corporeal nature of information. Nora had wanted to be a film-maker. She now Photoshops the same films she has made years ago, paring them down relentlessly to their minimal images. It is for and because of this (digital) minimalism that she survives. The trauma of her injury creates the poetic visuals unfolding in short segments. Her consciousness, fragmented by shrapnel, achieves a flow of info, but a flow that is a-temporal, outside of history and geography (as noted earlier, the footage has no markers of period or location). She does not recognise people, cannot identify her loved ones, all she recognises is film image and the flow of info across her screen.[3] She is rendered into the film, her consciousness is all film.

When the novel concludes we understand that the footage is not 'outside' or extrinsic to Nora, it is her-self, everted. The signage *is* her body's apophenic pattern recognition: she internalises the signs, materialises and corpo-realises them. Images, in Gibson's world of info-flows, are not outside realities (or even symbols) for interior states, they constitute the interior states of people. Individual selves are everted, sometimes with creases, sometimes not, into info-flows.

'Traumatic materialism' as I have termed the intersection of bodies and info-flows, is the eversion of selves and information.

Gibson's critique of informational capitalism—the capitalism that thrives primarily on the spread, control and collection of information—thus brings about a materiality to the body of data. If in his early fiction he was enthused by the idea of 'data made flesh' (as he put it in *Neuromancer*, 16) now he worries about the intersection of data with flesh. From Cayce's pathological reactions to logos to Nora's embedded shrapnel that produces footage/info, Gibson engages with the data/flesh interaction. Info-flows, suggests Gibson, needs bodies, bodies that cognitively register the info, channelise, subvert, or assimilate it. Information by itself, in *PT*, has little value: it has a human face and a human body. 'Traumatic materialism' is the condition where the endless, meaningless flow of information comes up short against the irreducible material human body. If in the postmodern city all we have is simulacra of simulacra, where the real cannot be really determined, then Gibson offers us the corporealised reality of pathology, injury and death as counters to the ceaseless flow of simulacra. Materiality, suggests Gibson, cannot be denied.

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Notes:

1. It is interesting that Gibson uses tapes rather than CDs or external memory sticks here. Win Pollard was mistaken for William Burroughs, as noted. And William Burroughs classic novel about info-flows was essentially about audio tapes (*The Nova Express*).
2. 'Everting' was a term Gibson appropriated in *Spook Country* (2008) from marine biology and mathematics to describe a condition where the inside could be turned out without creases. He used it to describe the condition where cyberspace is no longer an external, 'out there' state, but one which envelops us.
3. Of course, Nora's sister, Stella, and her uncle want widespread dissemination of the footage. An entire team of convicts is pressed into service to 'render', polish and upload the footage. It becomes, in itself, an act of rebelling against Russia's history when, as Stella tells Cayce, 'whole universes of blood and imagination, built over lifetimes in rooms like these, never to be seen' (306). There is the imminent threat of commercialization, warns Cayce (307).

‘Unknowing’ Cambodia

Kellie Greene

As an undergraduate student in 2007 I undertook an eight week internship with the *Phnom Penh Post* during the summer break where I was required to work as a photojournalist on a number of predetermined assignments. It was presumed by the editors of this Western owned paper—whose readership is Western elites and Cambodia’s nouveau riche—that as a photographer my role was, like that of the ethnographer, to observe and gather; activities which, as Fabian notes, are ‘visual and spatial activities’ (1983: 122). In this sense, the medium in which I found myself, and in particular, the *Phnom Penh Post* (as an ex-patriot text) functioned as the ‘enactment of power relations between societies that send out fieldworkers and societies that are the field’ (Fabian, 1983: 125). Indeed, the ‘observing reason’ which I, in my role as photojournalist, was expected to perform and, moreover, to make available imagistically to the paper’s readership was, as I came to see all too clearly, ‘implicated in victimage’ (Fabian, 1983: 125) insofar as it distanced the people whom I photographed, constructed them as other, as somehow less civilised than those who would view the images. At the same time, the images reaffirmed the readers’ sense of self as superior, as of the

present. What is evacuated in these representations is what Fabian describes as the human side of field work, the experiential noise (1983: 108), the being-with that makes such images less the captured truth of a distant other, than the record of an encounter with, an exposure to alterity. This evacuation, or spacio-temporalising production of abstract empirical knowledge is, of course, achieved through a range of framing techniques, from the identification of a story (as a 'story'), the ellipsis of other possible 'stories', to the cropping of images, the depth of field, the use of light, the sequencing of images, the semiotics of layout, and so on. And as Judith Butler so poignantly notes, 'there are frames that foreclose responsiveness…so that no alternative frames can exist; for them to exist and to permit another kind of content would perhaps communicate a suffering that might lead to an alteration of our political assessment… For photographs to communicate in this [the latter] way, they must have a transitive function. They do not merely portray or represent, but they relay affect.' (Butler: 955)

Returning, Reimag(in)ing, Reframing

> The heartbeat of Cambodia relies on the seasonal reversal of the flow of its major rivers, the Mekong and the Tonle Sap. As the rains flood the land, they fill the paddy fields to drown the weeds making it possible to grow the crops of rice. The change of flow brings riches and sustenance to the people, with bounties of fish.

In 2008 I returned to Cambodia, this time as an independent photographer. Since my last visit I had spent much time thinking about the ways in which the images I'd produced the previous year had been circumscribed, represented, how they had functioned temporally, spatially, politically and ethically. I felt, increasingly, that the images, their enframing of self-other relations, were implicated in the reproduction of colonialist ways of seeing and of knowing, in ontological violence if you like. I grieved for what had been lost,

for the richness, the generosity, the viscerality, the touch that was integral to the many and varied encounters that Cambodia gave to me as a gift I could not return. How, I wondered, in returning, could I respond with tact to this gift and the constitutive vulnerability that lies at its heart? How could I, in my practice as a photographer, avoid distancing the other, relegating him or her to an/other time and place, without simply subsuming him or her in the now of the I/eye? The task, as Derrida's work had shown me, was not to render the other present, to witness perfectly, to achieve 'community', since this would be to constitute him or her as intelligible in terms that are my own—again, a colonising gesture.

Having been moved in the intervening period by the work of theorists such as Judith Butler, Edward Said, Johannes Fabian, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy I returned to Cambodia, pushing against, disturbing, the teleological flow of evolutionary time in the hope that this journey without beginning or end—a journey which was never simply mine—might enable a kind of visual 'unknowing' that touches upon, and with tact, being-with and its co-constitutive effects.

In hearkening to the call of the other, these photographs constitute an offering rather than a record, an exposure rather than an exposé; it has little to do with questions of meaning, identity or truth with the instituting and patrolling of borders. As such, it does not aim to tell (the truth) of an encounter with the other situated in a static time and place. It is not an exercise in mastery that returns me to the status of subject by taking hold of, by comprehending, what moves me, unsettles me. Instead, I hope the text functions, at least in part, as 'the testimony of a fracture, of the opening onto the other' (Lyotard, 1988: 113); that it is a tactful response rather than a tactical one. As a gift of touch I hope that it touches, that it repeats the call of the other, of alterity. But of course, I cannot engineer this affect, circumscribe it in advance. The images presented here are, I hope, affective rather than simply representational. For me at least, they evoke the experiential noise—what Fabian describes as 'the hours of waiting, the beat of drums, the strange tastes and textures, the maladroitness, the

frustrations, the joys of purposeless clatter and conviviality' (1983: 108)—that is the trace of alterity, of a past that is present and of a now that is yet to come. In an attempt to performatively disrupt the spatio-temporal logic of hegemonic narrative and the colonising effects of such, the text 'proceed[s] here only according to a series of tangents' (Derrida, 2000: 131). Etymologically the term tangent derives from the Latin tangere, 'to touch', but from the eighteenth century onwards it has been used to refer to a touch(ing) that is divergent, erratic (online etymology dictionary). This necessarily multiplicitous, unpredictable sense of touch (as affective, as moving) is, according to Derrida, 'a kind of impertinent pertinence' (2000: 130): it constitutes exposure, not, as one might presume, to a thing (the other as object), but to no-thing, to the limit (of meaning, identity). Likewise, the images presented here touch upon, connect with one another in infinite and unpredictable ways. They form ever-shifting tangents, 'appeals to move and to be moved, together' (Irigaray, 1985: 217). They kiss the eyes that touch them and are touched by them; they refuse to inhabit the boundaries of the book, to dance to the tune of a single Author. They invade the eye/I before letting themselves be seen—at least, I hope they do.

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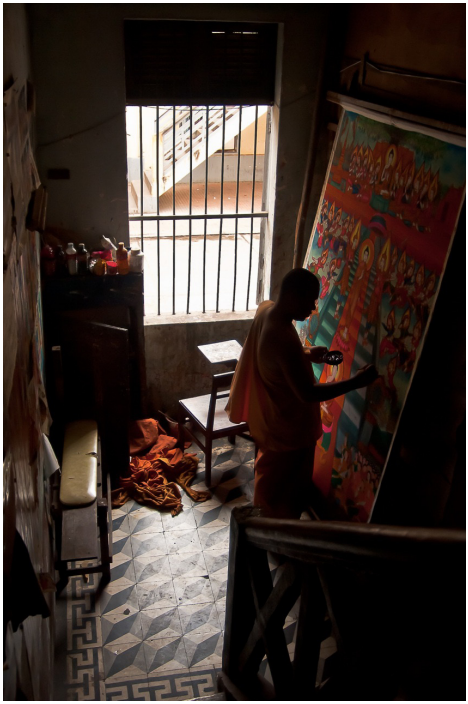
'My Shadow'

'Gecko'

'Cracked Mirror'

'Perimeter Tuol Sleng'



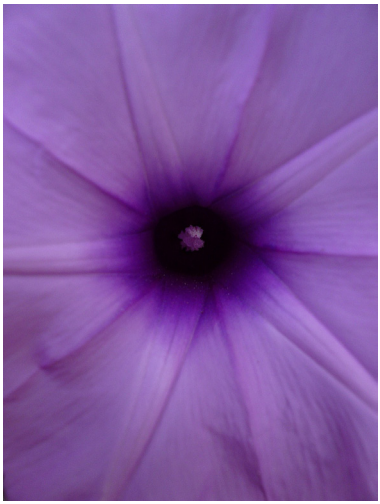
'Monk's Studio'

'Angkor Wat Descendants'

'Midday'

'Bottles'

'Steung Mancheay'



'Morning Glory'

'Gentia Violet'

'Defunct Stadium'

Nightlife

Prabha Ganorkar

The renowned contemporary poet Prabha Ganorkar writes in Marathi, which is one of the twenty-two official languages of India. The language is widely spoken in and around Mumbai (formerly Bombay), Pune, and primarily in the Western state of Maharashtra. It is written in the Devnagari script and has a rich literature. Marathi scholars point to Mukundraj as being the first Marathi author. He composed his verse work *Viveksindhu* in 1188 A.D.

All three poems have been translated by Shalmalee Palekar, and are from Ganorkar's collection *Vyatheeth (Spent),* Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1974.

She would stay up night after
Night, her eyes burning
Like the candles
Which were her only companions,
Waiting still, silent, for daylight
To arrive, loneliness
Enveloping her
Like a thick winter shawl. It was only
The chirping of the birds, she remembered later,
That had stopped her from
Gutting herself with a knife.

Poison Tree

Prabha Ganorkar
Translated by Shalmalee Palekar

Do not cast your eye on this exquisite branch.
It springs from a poison tree.
It will suck the venom out of the ground
And spread it in your veins
And you will blossom
With glittering poison flowers,
But bear no fruit.

Funeral Pyre

Prabha Ganorkar

Translated by Shalmalee Palekar

You smell it, don't you? The stench of burning flesh?
I can tell by the way your nostrils flare.
Yes, you're right, it's the smell of a burning corpse.
Surprising, I suppose—
This stench permeating an affluent suburb—
Or is it?
I light quite a few funeral pyres when I can, you know.
For my friend, killed in a plane crash
in a foreign country,
Or my grandfather, thrown by a horse
in a nameless forest.
For myself, killed in some forgotten past.
This pyre is for a dead woman. See, it's like this,
Her body lay unattended in the street
For three days and finally the smell…
What's that? You're in a hurry?
Oh well, hold on just a minute, won't you,
I'll join you as soon as her skull shatters.

Dark Blue Thread

Robert Raymer

'Does the watermark go this way, or that way?' Alan asked, as he held the bond paper in front of Salina. He turned the paper over, then back again.

Salina shooed him away from the full-length mirror and continued to button her beige, black-polka-dotted blouse. The beige complimented her coconut-brown skin; the polka dots, her black hair. She zipped up the black skirt and turned sideways. After inspecting her behind, she glanced at Alan's reflection in the mirror.

'It doesn't make any difference,' she finally said.

'Maybe not in Malaysia, but it does in the States,' he replied, gazing at her in the mirror. He tugged on the dark blue thread tied loosely around his wrist and studied the impression made by the thread as it turned white and then red.

Salina picked up the hairbrush from the dresser and began brushing her hair.

'I said maybe not here, but it does in—'

'Editors don't care about the watermark, just what's on the page. You know that. You're a writer.'

'Just to make sure, which way does it go—this way, or that way?' he turned the page over, then back again.

Salina shook her head and walked out of the room. Alan followed her into the spare bedroom where lately she'd been sleeping. Noticing the stack of green mosquito coils lying beside the ash-filled plate next to the bed, he wondered how she managed. Without a ceiling fan, it was almost impossible to get any real sleep. The room was too hot, too stuffy. Once when a legion of ants had driven them out of their bed, they had to spend the night there. Every few minutes, he would wake up; in the morning he was soaked in sweat.

Salina glanced his way. He held up the bond paper. She brushed past him, grabbed her purse and headed downstairs to where their cat, Madison, was waiting to be fed. Alan was right behind her. He crouched down to Madison and held up the sheet of paper.

'Now, Madison, what do *you* think about the watermark? Should it go this way, or that way?'

Madison seemed to be studying the imprint on the paper. She yawned and stretched her forepaws, then her hind legs. She hunched her middle and sat down and began to rub her whiskers against her shoulder.

The telephone rang. All three of them looked at the phone. Salina answered it and glanced his way.

'The same,' she replied. Moments later she added, 'He'll try…'

'Come on, Madison, this way, or that way?'

Madison licked her paw and rubbed it across her tabby face and brought it back again to her mouth in an efficient, circular motion. Alan shook the paper to get her attention. In mid-lick, with the tip of her tongue sticking out, Madison looked at him. She licked the other paw and washed the other side of her face.

Salina hung up the telephone and entered the washroom. Alan and Madison both entered before she could close the door.

'Who was that?' he asked, and tugged on the dark blue thread.

'Mother.' Salina leaned closer to the mirror. Using a piece of soaked cotton, she wiped at the skin beneath her eyes and around

her cheeks. She dropped the cotton into the rattan basket overflowing with tissues. The cotton tumbled onto the floor.

'What did she want?'

'She wants us to come for a visit this weekend.'

'We were just there,' he said. 'Why does she want us to come again?'

'It makes her happy.'

'Why doesn't anyone try to make *me* happy?'

Salina glanced at him as she applied some eye shadow from the cosmetics she got free for having written a feature story on the cosmetic company. He couldn't get over how beautiful she looked. Her colleagues were right; she looked twenty-five, not thirty-four.

He considered complimenting her, but instead he said in a dogged voice, 'My wife—the famous reporter.'

She smiled at this. He suspected she was smiling to herself and not at him for saying so, as if he no longer mattered. Except around others. Two months ago, she had invited him to attend an interview with a celebrated Malaysian singer who was giving a charity performance at Penang's Fort Cornwallis. While sitting opposite them, he had felt like a trophy husband used to impress the singer.

'So, you're from America,' the singer had said, and glanced at Salina as if to add, *lucky* you.

Another piece of cotton, followed by a balled tissue, bounced off the basket and landed on the floor. Salina pointed an eyeliner at the basket and asked, 'Would you mind?'

Alan shrugged. He nudged Madison with his foot. 'Come on, Madison, we got to take the trash out before this famous reporter edits us off her payroll.'

Madison trailed behind him through the living room but stopped at the door and waited while he carried the trash out and dumped it into the bin beside the dead papaya tree. Salina had planted the tree and the adjacent sugar cane shortly after moving into the terrace

house. The ground, full of cement debris carelessly discarded by the builders, hampered the tree's growth. All the branches, now rotting on the ground, had recently turned yellow and fallen off one by one.

The moment he set foot back into the house, Madison meowed and dashed for the kitchen.

'Why should I feed you?' he asked, brandishing the bond paper. 'You won't even tell me which way the watermark goes!'

Salina suddenly appeared. Lips curled, she snatched the paper out of his hand and held it up to the light.

'It goes *this* way,' she said, and marched back to the bathroom.

Alan studied the watermark, unconvinced. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes! I'm sure!' she slammed the bathroom door.

Alan barged inside, with Madison behind him. 'I thought it went the other way?'

Salina glared at him, her tiny hands turning into tiny fists.

'Alan, I'm warning you. I can't take much more of this. It's been two weeks! You've got to snap out of it, do you hear me?'

The telephone rang. Salina rushed past him to answer it.

'The same.' She draped a hand across her forehead. 'No, no, the ink's fine now. This time it's the watermark. Uh-huh, on bond paper …'

Alan tugged on the thread around his wrist as he knelt beside Madison. 'I think she's mad at me. What do you think?'

Madison scampered toward the kitchen. She paused midway to see if he was coming. Alan searched Salina's eyes as he rose to his feet. He wondered if the call was from P—her lover.

Alan took a fish out of the freezer and playfully taunted Madison with it. She sniffed, and then slapped it with her paw, suspicious of its familiar yet frozen form. He thawed the fish in hot water, fried it in oil, and mixed it with some leftover rice. Everyday it was the same—fish and rice. Yet Madison didn't seem to mind being served the same food day after day. It had to be monotonous. Like the

weather in Malaysia. Day after day, it was sunny and hot … until it rained, and then it rained for weeks, day after day. Day after day, Salina got her byline in the newspaper where she worked, while day after day he worked on a novel and all he got for his efforts were rejection letters.

Now Salina got letters from P.

Two weeks ago while searching in Salina's cabinet for the thread that he needed to repair his shorts, Alan spotted the sewing machine buried beneath a stack of clothes. He opened it to see if she had been using the dark blue thread that he needed. In addition to the thread, he found a red envelope. Curious, he peeked inside. There were several lengthy letters addressed to S. He had hoped it was something innocent and tried not to read them. They were none of his business. But if his wife were having an affair, he had every right to know. It would explain the recent increase in evening assignments and her vague, suspicious excuses for returning later than usual. He glanced at the first one; upon realising what was going on behind his back, he read all six of them. It nearly killed him.

Salina slipped on her black high-heels and grabbed an umbrella to ward off the sun. Already the heat was intense. She was half way to the gate when she glanced over her shoulder and saw him standing in the entrance, waving the bond paper. Her gaze dropped to his dark blue shorts.

'I thought you said the seam was ripped?'

Alan slowly twisted the dark blue thread around his wrist. 'It was.'

'You mean—you sewed them?' her voice trailed as she looked down at Madison stretching out beside him, looking content. She mumbled something about being late for work and hurried off to catch the bus.

Alan continued to wave as he watched her exit the gate and turn past the sugar cane and the dead papaya tree. Across the street, the Indian children were playing badminton, using their gate as the net.

The plastic shuttlecock landed on the red-tiled roof and the children looked at one another helplessly. Last night while lying alone in bed fighting his two-week bout of insomnia that had driven Salina into the spare bedroom, he had wanted to go into her room and tell her how much he still loved her, yet he couldn't make himself move. He just lay there, helplessly.

Alan tried to eat some cereal, but he wasn't hungry. He went upstairs to his office. The novel he had been working on was on his desk, in need of a final draft. He inserted the bond paper into the printer but instead of working, he sat there and stared at the watermark. He took the paper out and flipped it over.

Does it go this way, or that way?

He went into the bedroom and removed the sewing machine from the cabinet. He took out the red envelope containing the letters and carried it downstairs and put it on the kitchen table where Salina would find it. He grabbed a paring knife, the same knife he nearly used to slash his wrists. Instead, he had tied the dark blue thread around his left wrist, as a reminder that life for him was that fragile. He severed the thread and laid it on top of the envelope.

Spotting Madison sleeping on the exercise mat that he and Salina had brought over from America but now rarely used, he lay next to her and thought about how happy he and Salina had been while living in the States. He thought of the regional manager position that he had given up to come to Malaysia; he wondered how things might have been different had they stayed.

The fact that he no longer had a regular paycheck was difficult for him. Unable to sell his articles, short stories and his novel, he had to resort to asking money from Salina to cover his writing expenses and for pocket money. It was humbling. He felt ashamed each time she handed it to him.

Colleagues and friends of his wife would ask him, 'Where are you attached?' In reply, he would mention that he was a writer, and

when they asked what he wrote or pressed him for the name of his publisher, he would mumble about the novel that he was working on. He couldn't help noticing the glances they exchanged or overhearing their comments:

'You mean he *doesn't* have a job?'

'Is his wife supporting *him*?'

Now he didn't know if he had a future in Malaysia if Salina left him. His one fear was being stuck here with no job, no savings—unable to pay the monthly expenses on his own. Maybe if he went back to the States, he could get his old job back. His old life back. Or would he have to start everything from scratch? Would Salina agree to give up her life here to move back with him, so they could start their marriage over again? But that would mean giving up her career, her life here, and her lover. Would she be willing to do that for him, for them? He was no longer sure.

Madison began to stir. He tried to hold her back, but she bound over him and rushed for the opened door.

Standing in the doorway was Salina.

'I forgot my desk key.'

Alan nodded as he got up from the floor. He knew she was lying; she kept her desk key with her house keys so she *wouldn't* forget it, after having done so on more than one occasion. He gestured to the kitchen. Salina peeked around the corner. When she saw the red envelope on the table, she tried to suppress her gasp.

'I figured you might want those.'

'Did you … read them?'

'Did you give me a choice?'

Salina avoided his piercing gaze. 'I'm sorry.'

'That's it, sorry?'

'What do you want me to say?'

'I want you to look at me. I want you to talk to me. I want you to quit ignoring me. I'm here for Christsakes! I may not be making any money right now, but I was making good money in the US. I've made a lot of *sacrifices* for this marriage. A lot.'

When they first moved there, he had used his savings to furnish their rented terrace house. The house came with *nothing*. He had to buy all the furniture and household appliances, including a new refrigerator, oven, and washing machine—everything they needed in order to turn the place into a home. In addition to the monthly payments for rent, food, clothes, utilities, and minor entertainment like going to the movies, or out for an occasional dinner or drinks, he bought a secondhand car for Salina at a ridiculously high price, which she ended up crashing, though it wasn't entirely her fault. This went on for nearly a year, until Salina, after a few false starts, landed a secure job with a decent salary as a reporter. By then, his savings had been wiped out.

Alan went up to Salina, and instead of hugging her as he had intended, he slapped her. It felt like he slapped himself, which he needed, if only to wake himself up. He immediately regretted slapping her, though.

'I will not be a cuckolded husband—not here, not in Malaysia,' he said, evenly, keeping his voice low, respectful. 'It's hard enough for me here as it is without *that*.'

Salina didn't say anything. Perhaps she was wondering if he was going to slap her again, something he had never done before; or worse—beat her up for committing adultery. He was glad she didn't speak because he didn't know what else to say to her. He knew though that it was best that neither of them spoke right now.

They needed time to think about their marriage.

The longer she stood there, the more he began to feel self-conscious.

'Look,' he finally said, 'you better get going, or you're going to be late for work. We can talk later.'

Salina nodded.

'I'm sorry for slapping you, but—' he stopped short. He was going to say 'but you did something *terribly* wrong.' Yet was it entirely her fault? Had he done anything to contribute to this? Had he neglected her in any way? They definitely needed to talk about what led to

this, and how to get this P out of their marriage. He then thought about the slap—how the colour had changed from white to red—and wondered if, in some way, it was going to save his marriage or push Salina further into P's arms. He didn't know, yet he felt it was the right thing to do under the circumstances. At least, he was taking a stand in their marriage. Taking action, too.

For the second time that morning, he stood at the door with Madison at his side. He again watched Salina leave, but this time, he did not wave. He was thinking about his novel. Perhaps what he needed was a new ending. Maybe that was exactly what he needed right now, a whole new ending.

Madison looked up at him.

'Don't tell me you're hungry again!' He walked past her and went up to his office. He didn't care which way the watermark went. It didn't matter. He began to type, but when he came to the letter p, he paused. Who in the hell was this P? Was it someone he knew? He decided right then he didn't want to know. It didn't matter. He wanted to put these two weeks behind him. He typed some more. Tears began to fall, but he was determined to keep on typing.

Vaka Moana

Omar Musa

The sea is a highway of spume,
its shifting brow
festooned by pulverised stars and moons.

The ocean floor is thatched with bones,
where sailors and oars pirouetted
in coffins of light
downwards
green blue black.

The same floor
these islands were once plucked from
as tubers from mud.

In the guts of monstrous dugouts,
hundreds of men sweated and stank
beneath an eyeless *kave*
with sharp breasts and lacquered grain,
who saw much and nothing.

Men whose eager muscles slid
as they arrowed to many shores,
pluming like dye through branching coral.
Astronauts of their time,
though history would soon flinch
and forget them.

Casualties

Omar Musa

It is a war
to wade through swathes
of drum tobacco
and spits of ribboned bourbon
into the ground zero of the night.
we guide white doves
onto our tongues,
and dance like lunatics,
stuttering through the strobe lights,
supplicating to the deity behind the decks.
swivelling gazes,
whose round is it?
Grunting and fighting as apes do.

The strobes drive us apoplectic.

We yearn like crying swallows
for a woman's affection,
yearning to nest
against their sternums.

Yet when we find them,
we scalp them,
and hold aloft these dripping trophies of battle
to our panting
compadres.

Being silent is an art

Omar Musa

The seam of history is stitched
with the bones of those
who remained silent.

Buying Time

Isabela Banzon

A night like no other: 10 pm
and I'm straining to listen to you

explain that buying time is
a take-out dinner of fish and chips,

Moby Dick showing on your 3D
tv, more washing to do—the laundry

you mean, hand-washing her
favourite coral-red top and frothy

underwear (not the hospital gown)—
after the ocean flooded her lungs,

after she was washed with the cancerous
detritus to a talcum-powdered

shore (that's how you understood
the surgical procedure)—earlier,

you drove to the hospital with a box
of profiteroles and injectable

Panadol to find her philosophical
then in tears—this part you don't explain

so I'm guessing—it's like
the moon over the shoals and the tide

rising (tonight is breathtaking)
and you not noticing

that your coffee has gone cold—
and you're not really talking to me.

Room for a Beginning

Isabela Banzon

The budding
amid the random passion.
—Jack Gilbert

The room was like getting unmarried.
Starting over.
Letting go.
Stairs
leading to a landing
and laundry. Detergent,
fabric softener, all-
purpose rack. The office
of Human Resources
below, at ground level. Names,
addresses, dates of departure,
arrivals, next of kin,
in a folder.
A hallway.
Roses
on the bedcover.
A clock emptied of time.
Her window
like snow
melting. A stoplight
blinking all night while the small town
slept.

She had come to
a beginning. A room
in winter.
The thermostat set.
She—
with him
in another room:
in Kelantan, they studied the art of batik;
at Torres, wine.
A train
pulled in the distance
where much of themselves used to be.
Half a day slow.
In the Year of the Tiger.
By the Fox River.
She was finally alone.
What excited her most
was how she would take the call.

Simple Plan on the South Luzon Expressway

Isabela Banzon

As if there were something ahead of them…
as if there were…something…the same song
on 'Repeat', the same wail
Everyone's got somewhere to go.

As if there were something of the same song
in the backseat. They keep time:
everyone's got somewhere to go
but they're going in another direction.

In the backseat, they keep time
to their father driving, their mother
going in the other direction.
Strapped to the seat, how can they stop

their father's driving? Their mother's
refilling at a gas station. She's
strapped to the seat. They want to stop
for a pee and a sandwich and soda

refill at a gas station. *I'm just a kid…I'm just a kid…*
They wail past exits
after a pee and a sandwich and soda
as if there were something ahead of them.

The Cloud and Ms. Sun

Ankur Betageri

There was a cloud. And because it was so high up in the sky it could not see everything and everyone. But the cloud was unhappy, as it could not do anything for anyone. One day it met Ms. Sun on the way and asked her to melt him.

'It's very easy to do that. But are you sure you want to melt?' asked Ms. Sun.

'Oh yes, I am! I need to melt for thirsty people to be able to quench their thirst and for the wilting plants to grow again.'

'Yes, but once you begin to melt, you'll not be yourself anymore, you'll be everywhere and not many people will be able to recognise you.'

'That's all right Ms. Sun,' said the cloud and got ready to melt and to reach the earth.

In the next few seconds the cloud began to steam and little droplets of water appeared all over its body and it began to drip. It was a scary experience. Imagine yourself melting and dripping like a piece of wax!

'Ah, stop, stop, Ms. Sun! Before I melt I need to know where I'm going … I need to know where I am going to fall.'

'Well,' said Ms. Sun calmly. 'I told you to decide before I started melting; now it's beyond my power, I cannot stop. And, as to where you are going to fall, I don't know that either, you will fall where the wind takes you and I don't know where the wind will take you.'

'Oh god!' whispered the cloud in fright. 'I shouldn't have asked you to melt me. Now what will happen to me! I wanted to feed the thirsty and save the dying. Now I might easily end up dripping on a pile of garbage or on the mad waves of the sea. Oh god what will happen to me!'

And before the cloud could realise what was happening it had melted completely and was darting through the air towards the earth. A few drops were swept away by a gust of wind and they fell on a fallow garden by a little red house where a mother and her son lived.

A few more drops were carried by the whirlwind and they fell into a drying lake where the fishes were about to die without water.

Another set of drops fell on a long line of cars stranded in a traffic jam, and given the afternoon heat they soon evaporated from the car-roofs or were wiped away from the windscreen by the wipers.

Many other drops pattered on the road and entered the sewage drain, and others ran into small tributaries, and flowing, joined the river.

The next day when the sun beamed in the east, a small puddle on the road began to speak.

'I don't know whether you recognise me Ms. Sun. I am the cloud which you helped melt—or at least a part of it. As you said, I am not my old self anymore nor am I sure whether I would be able to recognise my other parts if I meet them somewhere. But I am sure of one thing: that each of my parts is completely fulfilled and happy. They have reached where they were supposed to reach and are neither thirsty to quench somebody's thirst nor hungry to sate someone's hunger. I am thrilled that I achieved this transformation. Thank you very much for helping me melt!'

The sun beamed warmly as it listened to the puddle and in a few moments the puddle was steaming and slowly evaporating. 'Dear cloud,' said Ms. Sun 'I'm taking you to the heavens again. Because only those who have the courage to melt and reach everyone regardless of form deserve a life of grace and beauty. And you don't have to worry about loosing yourself, the more you give in to warmth and melt, the greater will be your experience of freedom, and beauty. The more you give of yourself, the more you become.'

And before the puddle could realise, it had turned into a huge fluffy cloud and was spreading across the limitless expanse of the blue sky. And people driving by the countryside stopped their cars and bikes, and lifted their shades over their eyes, to look at a magnificent cloud unfolding like a flower in the sparkling brilliance of the noon sky.

Twelve hours

Mohamad Atif Slim

1. ***Elsewhere***

i

It began as
a bunch of words on
the news ticker, crawling
surreptitiously underneath the almighty bobbing head
of the news anchor, like someone else's

ii

problem:

Hungry waters, it said—
they are coming. I only properly
understood the warning four days later, when
the grocer's lips trembled
slightly behind the counter.
My fingers found

his disquiet in the one-litre carton
of milk and the can of beans I unpacked
onto the kitchen table: should I
have bought more? But my garden
was dry, the waters

miles away.

iii

That night an hour north the sky
turned sea turned earth. A flash flood
on quicksilver carriage. People
had to climb their roofs. Cars
piled in the
water's mouth like dead bodies;
some were carried away
by the currents. Some had
people inside.

iv

A woman on the TV:
the night was dark—
there was a storm—
in the split-second lightnings,
i could see the whirlpools of water
like blind starved children
groping the sides of my house, and
i didn't know if it was the water rising
to get me, or if i was the one
sinking down,
down down towards it—

2. *Antebellum*

i

The waters were coming.
The tiny grocer's was
packed like a mecca—mothers
steering children still in
their school uniforms, people
in office clothes. Shelves were stripped
almost empty. Food items

scattered the aisles in the rush—
a box of juice, burst, in my path. I glimpsed
my yellow eyes in its puddle.
The panic was pandemic, it was difficult
to think: I only grabbed
whatever was closest to me,
whatever was left—

ii

By two thirty in the afternoon, it became clear:
this was the Exodus of my age. The town
was becoming ghost: cars, packed full
with furniture, flooded the streets.
I saw the same disbelief in the faces buoyant
behind the windscreens, buoyant
like white sheets whipping in the wind: how
this chaos had broken
our ordered lives.

On the manicured lawns, there were
tell-tale signs of spontaneous flight:
sofas in the driveway, bookcases, trunks,
expensive stereos hefted to
the hilltop houses two streets away.
I saw my neighbour crying,
and I understood how our fear was
not in the spectacle, nor the
commotion peopling the once benign
spaces between our houses—it was
in the shouts, the panicked voices,
the calm instructions of the adults
to the children, and the children's
questions. It was in the frightening way
my elderly neighbour stood helpless

by his doorway, knowing how
the flood waters will not discriminate
when they come.

iii

There was not enough time to run:
a river had swelled over the bridge out of town.
I made my bed in the attic.
This is my house; I am centurion.

3. *The wait*

i

The power had been cut. The night
was a nightmare. Rain fell
in hisses from the starless tarp above us.
We were like trapped mice, dreading
to hear the abrupt roar of a heavier fall.

ii

Crouched in the dark, I
remembered recently reading an article
about a drought in Africa. I cried,
because I forgot the name of the place, and I can't
recall the faces in the photographs.

If it floods—
once it floods—
after it floods—

I hope someone will remember
the name of this town, remember
my place in it and all the other people here, remember
how we waited for the water
in the dark.

4. *The first act of god*

i

—why have you forsaken me?

though I mirror your
pointing finger, in the place
anointed the twenty-first century
church, ever for the loveless.

why have you forsaken me?

when I toss my weighted net
towards the horizon, towards east,
muttering chants out of need, praying
for the children and the heedless.

why have you forsaken me?

inside the uniform light, the
bursting sun, the profane flood of
confused faith, where confused,
my heart had screamed lipless:

why have you forsaken me?—

ii

—give us our fill, our bread to eat,
a drink, and make us amongst those
who receive your bounty, not those who
transgress against you, or who have lost, or
are lost themselves and wandering, and

deliver us from evil,
deliver us from evil,
deliver us from Evil—

5. *The sixth hour*

i

A battery-powered radio spoke to me all night:
The water has reached Bangor.
Ponsonby. Jacksonville.
Jasper. Boulder. Residents
in other towns are advised to remain calm. But

calm? It was the calm that
we feared—the calm
of the dark, the calm of the cold hands in the water,
waiting to reach out for
our hair, our arms, our feet,
strangle us,
drown our town.

No, there was no calm that night:
we all kept vigil, in case the water
sneaked.

6. *The second act of god*

i

—there is the seed snug in fruition;
there is the handshake of a Star;
there is a grey bay, and the sea, and
a tree, with scallop leaves, and a smell
like the attar of roses; the tincture's
dye is dry unrotting, its words now spoken—

ii

—praises! O, raise us! praises be to our saviour, raise us!—
—your will, O lord,
let your will be done—

7. *The twelfth hour*

i

Morning rose like a blushing pink petal
in the sky. I might've seen the sun
for the first time—
dry as the earth it blessed, ending a night
that will become the myth
for my generation.

We drove, many of us, in a neat procession, and
even more had chosen to walk, as if
determined to test the solidity of the ground:
a mass migration through our suburban Serengeti.
I felt like part of a new race
after the world had ended, as if we had chased
the back of the langoliers and caught up.

Along the streets, the black eyes of
many emptied homes stared at us, front doors gaping
open like hollowed skulls.

From one, a looter deftly
crossed the lawn and disappeared.
His face had turned to us for a second,
his eyes a startled bird's.

ii

We congregated at
the brim of our atoll, in multiple lines
by the flood's edge. We understood then how
the water had almost reached us last night. We were
saved only because of the incline on this side of town.

I could hear faint voices of relief,
animation, rage, grief in the crowd, but what
reverberated the most in the air was
something like awe, a mutedness akin to
the stunned cottonwool reaction to
hearing the sudden knell of
a funeral bell. In front of us,

the road suddenly dove into the water.
Beyond that, a mesa-shaped piece
of the local park was half-swallowed
down its sloping back. In the distance,
the top of roofs poked from underneath
the calm chocolate film.

8. *Postbellum*

i

As the light grew, we saw
new details in the landscape,
each simultaneously exciting, devastating:
The earth (renewed, it seemed, yet extinguished) spread before us
like a revelation rediscovered, or an odd triumph. The thought
must've crossed all our minds—had we
truly conquered nature that night? yet none of us
could muster the arrogance to answer—just not here, not
at this edge the world, this margin of civilisation.

Notes:

This poem is entirely fictional, although it was inspired by real accounts of the Queensland, Australia floods of December 2010 – January 2011 (several descriptions of events after the/a flood were inspired from a reading of http://www.indymedia.org.au/2011/01/12/brisbane-flood-from-an-island-in-suburbia). 'the langoliers' is in reference to the Stephen King novella of the same name in the collection *Four Past Midnight.*

pre 9/11

Goldie Osuri

the sun and i
parted ways
at Kingsford Smith, Sydney

we met again in San Fran
the sun on her round trip
I on mine

i had monsters
other than night
to dispel

U.S. Immigration asks
where i learnt to speak
English

you wash a lot of dishes?

pleasantries reserved for non-white, non-citizen bodies
others on UA862 file past
with a measure of pre/911 nonchalance

perhaps he wasn't racist
perhaps he was
just doing his job

terrorising
those bodies
who part ways with the sun

only to be dazzled
by the eagle
who rips

deep into bellies
searching methodically
for that fraught, flayed nerve

postcard darshan[1] for rj[2]

Goldie Osuri

staring dead
into my eye
you
black man
in a mirrored warp
bring forth lyrics born lonesome
say, oh how the wind do howl
in the coffin of the universe

the sun
a spark
time
a train's whistle
love
a blues note

Notes:

1. Darshan: (Sanskrit: 'auspicious viewing') in Hindu worship, the beholding of a deity (especially in image form), revered person, or sacred object. The experience is often conceived to be reciprocal and results in the human viewer receiving a blessing.
2. Robert Johnson, 1911–1938. A legendary African-American musician, known as the 'King of Delta Blues'. He received very little recognition in his lifetime.

Bollywood

Ankur Betageri

Ever since Arun realised he was gay he was tormented by a vague feeling of confusion, and this gave him the appearance of a sensitive person. After completing his Mass Com in 1994 from a reputed Bangalore college he decided that he wanted to be a film director, and with the help of his seniors in college, joined a production house as Assistant Director in Mumbai. Arun, who had grown up reading the classics—and later the existential novels—was sick and tired of seeing heroes and heroines running around trees and shooting those interminable shaadi* sequences. While his friends feverishly discussed his job and congratulated him—as if getting a job with Karma Productions was an achievement in itself—he wondered why, of all places, he had joined this banner.

Haroon had been Arun's friend and love of four years; last year when Haroon was visiting his family in Kashmir he and his family were decimated in a terrorist attack, and, with that, ended Arun's dream days of love. Yes, their love had kindled the fire of indignation and moral protest in both the houses. Haroon's father Mustaq had taken him to Delhi's IHBAS, and, after a thorough check up, when the doctor said, 'There is

* Hindi word for wedding.

no right and wrong in one's sexual preference—it is just a choice. It is not a disease to be cured,' he had smouldered, and not knowing what to do, had just given up on him. Who would have thought that just two years after this their whole family would be obliterated by terrorist bullets!

Arun was handsome. Half the girls in his class has been after him until they realised he was gay. Devika, the daughter of his landlord who had loved him without knowing he was gay, burst out on learning about his homosexuality, half out of ignorance about what it meant to be gay, and half out of the anger which grew out of the realisation that he could never be hers: 'Why should a guy like *you* be gay? This is just a weakness of your mind! You can definitely come out of this.' Arun—who normally kept his cool—flew into a fit of rage on hearing this and splashed the remaining beer in his glass on her face giving all the frustrated stags at the bar a chance to thrash him—which they happily did, desperate as they were to become heroes in the eyes of a helpless girl. Devika, horrified at this new development, had tried her best to stop them from beating him up, but upon failing to do anything to the pack of wolves that these drunkards had become, she had wept so loudly that the whole incident had taken the form of an urban legend which people invariably discussed in that Koramangla bar after a peg or two. Just two days after this Arun had left his P.G.* accommodation and had rented a room in Padmanabhanagar, and after thinking for days on end about leaving Bangalore, he had finally reached Mumbai.

In Mumbai, Arun shared an expensive flat in Bandra with Sanjay, the boyfriend of his senior at college, Shirina. He knew very well that such an arrangement would not have been possible if Shirina knew he was gay. That's why he never breathed a word to anyone in Mumbai about it. But still there were rumours that he had got job at the prestigious Karma Productions, run by a gay director, only because of his being gay. When makeup-man Joy, who had become close to him on the sets asked him, 'Are you gay?' he had neither accepted it with an 'Yes' nor refused with a 'No' but had only laughed mysteriously which made people all the more curious about his sexual identity.

* Paying Guest is an Indian idiom for a lodger.

In the party held after the premier of the Karma Productions' multi-starrer *Dil Mein Jaaga Pyaar*, the job of looking after the Press fell upon Arun. While walking up and down the hall, greeting and asking people to have wine and champagne, smilingly declining to answer weird questions about actresses and actors of the film, he bumped into Vid Shah. Vid was the correspondent of a fashion magazine whom Arun had met a couple of times before, and he immediately launched into a serious talk on cinema.

Asking, 'Arun, who are your favourite film directors?' and getting Bergman, Tarkovsky, Werner Herzog and Zhang Yimou as answers, he asked, 'When do you think Indian cinema will be liberated from movies like Karun Malkani's?' in a tone which in no uncertain terms criticised the chief of Karma Productions and Arun's boss.

'Mr. Vid we will be liberated of those movies only when people like you walk out of the glamorous world of fashion magazines.'

'Oh, no! I'm not so important. I am just an IIT* drop out; if I hadn't joined this place I would be jobless. I am here only because my uncle is the editor of this magazine. But why are *you* here?'

'Why shouldn't I be?' said Arun and smiled, and whispering an 'excuse me' he went on talk to some other person.

It was ten, and though the party was officially over and many people had left, Vid Shah and a couple of drunk senior journalists, who were talking in loud voices, still lingered.

'Vid, what's the matter, you seem to be very high?' asked Arun with a smile.

'Uh, yeah! Once in a while I allow myself a little indulgence,' he said, and taking out his gold-plated, expensive-looking cigarette case from his trouser pocket, held it out in front of Arun: 'Smoke?'

* Short for Indian Institute of Technology. The IITs are India's top ranked institutes for higher learning in engineering and technology known for their highly competitive admission process; the rigorous and demanding academic programs at these institutes are known to encourage a consistent rate of dropout among the underachieving students.

Arun picked up a cigarette and exposing his wine-warm body to the seductive charms of the cool night breeze, began to take deep passionate drags on his cigarette.

'Arun, I know everything about you. Vijay, who was your classmate in Mass Com, is my friend,' said Vid drawing on his cigarette, 'Even I am a bi,' he added.

'Bi?'

'Bisexual.'

'Oh,' Arun suddenly rose to leave but was pulled back by Vid. 'Look, I'm not making a pass at you. The photographer who was taking photographs here a while ago is my partner, Salim. I also have a girlfriend. I just felt like telling the truth about myself, that's all,' he said and made Arun sit.

'The thing that I wanted to ask you was—why even talented people like you involve yourself making brain-dead movies like these? How can people like you encourage these moronic films which make no sense and only glorify wealth?'

'Vid, what is cinema?' Arun asked, blowing out a puff of cigarette smoke. 'Do you think my director doesn't know he is doing a cheap film? Do you think the kind of films he does reflects his life? What is cinema?'

'I can't believe this! Are you justifying the kind of films Karun Malkani makes? What is cinema—I don't know, please tell me!'

'Vid, cinema is just a fantasy about how we can live grandly and do things with a great deal of aplomb. And because it is a fantasy, it is also just a business. The kind of films that our director makes depends on the kind of life people accept openly—and that he knows what people want is proved by box-office.'

'Ha ha … Arun, what are you trying to say?'

'Vid, it is easier to criticise the industry being outside it, even I used to criticise like you. But after entering it I am realising some truths. Do you think a director who suffers daily the insecurities of gay identity—and who, in spite of that, has emerged as Bollywood's most successful director—finds any happiness in shooting the inane conversations of upper-middle-class joint families; in making movies

which look like marriage videos; in travelling to six exotic locations with the hero and heroine to shoot an almost meaningless love song?'

Vid, with his eyebrows knit, was listening seriously.

'To change cinema is to change the very mindset of our society. Even to this day I dream of seeing two gay lovers running around trees singing a duet. But when will I see it on screen? When there is an openness in our society to accept such facts. Such openness can definitely come through cinema but to expect that it should come *first* in cinema, is wrong. It is wrong to expect our directors to make films like Almodovar just because they are gay; we have to think whether our society is giving space for such expression.'

'Are you saying that our society does not allow such expression?'

'Our society means us, it is important that we ask ourselves how much we accept and appreciate these films. Artistic expression emerges out of the same mysterious source which provides the life sap for social change. Cultural evolution is not something which happens through a fashion or a fad—the extent to which cinema can grow as an art form depends on the extent to which the ordinary spectator can open himself up to cinema.'

'Sir, veg!' a waiter stood by them holding a platter full of crackers. Arun picked up a cheese cracker and munching on it, turned towards Vid. 'It is cold, isn't it?' he said.

'Your glass is empty—that's why,' Vid smiled.

'Yours is empty too,' said Arun clinking Vid's glass with his softly. He got up and gestured towards the bar, 'Come let's have some more,' he said.

Sipping white wine from their filled glasses they walked towards the door which opened on to a lawn.

'Having said all this—I still believe that like any artist even the film director should fight incessantly to bring about a sense of openness in the society,' said Arun and raised his glass.

Vid, trembling to the cool breeze of the night, also raised his glass of wine, saying 'For the fight!' and clinking his glass with Arun's, spilled wine over the red carpet.

Journal

Ranjit Hoskote

Guessing your way by barbed light,
you come to a peak where a prophet scarred
two tablets with lightning.

Unwrap your prism and hone the sun.
Begin a more modest entry
on the matte scroll of grass.

Your journal opens in the rock-run silence
above the cliffs, its first glyphs
scored in limestone:

doors through which the early martyrs walked
down to the village, the stake, the rain of stones.

Stirring an ash circle with a forked rod,
you listen in the drought of sound
for the voices that drove raw-boned hands

to gouge the limestone, plough the stream.
You cannot read the world they pictured into words
or call up the gods their pictures spelled.

Shout your name. It bells out, returns.
Claim these cliffs. Your voice boomerangs.
Whatever you call it is only for now.

This bruised earth has crushed more names
than you could count.

*

The *wadi* lets you trespass.
You are lulled by noontime music.
Its false horizons take you prisoner.

Stumbling through its dry gullies,
you hear stonecutters
carving fruit for the ear:

grooved vowels, flared plosives
chiselled by wet hands. You stop, accept
these phrases of gratitude, chants of love.

Song is the only present.
Your time starts now.

Base Camp Of The Lost Expedition

Ranjit Hoskote

Beware the pent-up heaviness of traces.
The tent has vanished, thread by thread,
leaving only a flap to flutter
between two loud oceans of air.

Behind it, in the space
that was once behind it,
the needlepoint wind
has filigreed a still life

with scattered melons, rusted knives
and, stunned by an anglepoise lamp,
a coffee mug standing on the coaster
of its own shadow.

Call the event into question,
summon each version
to the witness stand.
This dryness belongs

to a strip of skin
torn from the desert's thigh.
The rain trembles
in the airspace on the other side

*

of a sealed border.

The Royal Procession

Smriti Ravindra

Only Preeti and Sachi had no fears. They sat at the edge of the gorge, the one that divided their neighbourhood from Chundevi, and dangled their feet into its abyss as though nothing could frighten them this morning—not the dark trees below their toes, nor the darker flowers. Between the gorge and the lane that rolled away from it, dipping and then rising into Ganesh Basti, lay a broad strip of land, soft and flat, woven and dappled with shamrocks. On mornings such as this women and men sat cross-legged upon the grass and planned weekends or talked politics.

It was a perfect day for the Royal Procession that was soon to go down Ringroad. It was April and flowers were furious upon the trees. The ground was green and marigolds grew accidentally along the lane, the flowers reappearing and disappearing as the path wickerd amidst the houses and the fields. Wisps of clouds sailed the clean sky. The moon still floated, pale like china. There were people out on walks and some hinted at the possibility of democracy in Nepal in the distant future. Men agreed and disagreed, as discussions go, and others were idle upon the meadow, but nobody, other than Preeti and Sachi, ventured too close to the gorge. There were stories, not only

of human ghosts, but of animal spirits trapped in its bottom, and of creatures, who, unable to crawl out into the sunlight, had morphed into unrecognisable beings.

The new school year had begun and the girls had with them their satchels. Sachi's was new and brightly orange, and though Preeti's was not, hers too was bulging with crisp textbooks and notecopies still uncontaminated by ink. The girls had decided to cover and label their books here and behind them, leaning on the shamrocks, was a roll of brown-paper held together with a rubber-band, a pair of scissors, a wad of cellophane sheets upon which the girls had placed a good sized stone to keep the plastic from fluttering, and a band of scotch-tape. In the gorge there were prehistoric animals and primeval insects singing ancient songs but the girls were as oblivious to their antiquity as they were to the trees hissing like witches in the slight wind. They stared listlessly at the small woods that started where the gorge ended on the other side. And though they could not see Edna's mother, they knew she was walking up the lane towards them, holding her head and complaining to her husband about the morning sickness. Now that Sachi had started her periods, now that her breasts itched and were sore, everyone was pregnant. Now that it was not very cold, all the pregnant women were walking all day.

Sachi sighed. 'Let's jump down and kill ourselves,' she said.

'Let's,' said Preeti.

And they sighed again and stared at the chasm. The gorge was bundled and bursting with morning glories and coneflowers, and bachelor buttons were intensely blue, like stars.

'Our frocks will get caught in the trees and we will be hanging like kites from the branches,' said Sachi.

'All torn.'

'Completely tattered.'

'No point jumping.'

Behind them the cellophane rattled in the wind, the scotch-tape, standing on its side, rolled an inch forward, and Preeti's satchel, precariously balanced, fell on its back with a soft thump.

'Let's just cover the books,' said Preeti.

So they crawled up onto the grass, took the books out from their bags, and stacked the texts into two piles. The taller one was Sachi's because Sachi was in grade eight, two grades higher than Preeti. The girls had decided to be systematic this year. They would cover one of Sachi's books, then one of Preeti's, then one of Sachi's, then one of Preeti's. Whatever was left would be done the following week.

They mulled over the stacks, scarcely moving till Preeti shuffled her pile and placed her favourite book, *The History of Nepal*, on the very top. It had the prettiest cover, one she wanted to preserve better than the unlaminated, black-and-white covers of the others.

The History of Nepal showed Prithvi Narayan Shah, Nepal's first Shah ruler. On the cover he stood before the rectangular map. In his left hand he held a sword, slanted down upon the ground. His right hand was raised and a ringed index finger pointed towards the sky. He wore a crown frilled with emeralds and topped with the white plume of the bird of heaven. Behind him the throne, thick golden and coiled upon itself, rose like fire. His throne was imaged after the Shesh Naaga—the thousand headed cobra upon which Lord Vishnu, the creator of cosmic destiny, reclined in the oceans of heaven.

'Let's cover this one first, please, please,' Preeti said and the girls settled down to cutting brown paper to size, to pressing down the paper upon the book, to scotch-taping the flaps to place.

'If nobody marries us by the time we are twenty, let's marry each other,' said Sachi.

'Yes,' said Preeti and scotched a flap.

They continued to cut and fold, to cover and stick, but it was obvious that their hearts were not in the task. All week they had spoken of nothing but the Royal Procession and now that the morning was here Sachi was having her periods again.

'I am sick and tired of it,' Sachi said.

'Me also,' said Preeti.

Preeti was disappointed by Sachi's history book too. The cover was drab, showing not the glamour of monarchs and maps, but the

monotony of national symbols—a cow, a rhododendron, a danfe, all in beige, and badly photographed. So, finally, after finishing only two subjects for each, the girls slid back to the edge of the gorge and once again dangled their feet.

'But what if somebody does marry us?' asked Preeti, sucking on her tart candy. They swung their legs back and forth, their heels brushing against the small tufts of grass growing upon the walls.

'Do you think Prince Nirajan will be in the car with His Majesty today?' Preeti asked. She hesitated a second before adding, 'I think I am in love with Prince Nirajan.' She looked at her friend but Sachi was still gazing beyond the gorge. 'I think it is all right to love Prince Nirajan. He is only fourteen, only three years older than I am.'

'He is only one year older than me,' Sachi said.

'That is not age difference enough,' said Preeti. 'There should at least be three years between husband and wife. Besides, Prince Nirajan looks too much like Rajiv. Last month I saw the Prince playing football on the TV and I had to look a long time to make sure it was Prince Nirajan and not Rajiv. You cannot fall in love with Prince Nirajan. That will be like falling in love with Rajiv.' Rajiv was Sachi's older brother.

Sachi pulled more candy out of her pocket and the girls sucked on their strips. When Preeti stretched back and lay on the ground there was a perfectly shaped cloud on the sky and a fleet of swallows sweeping past it. 'I could not fall in love with the Crown Prince,' she said. 'The Crown Prince is ten years older than me. My parents will never agree to our match. Or maybe they will. What do you think? It is not a joke to be married to the Crown Prince. If I marry the Crown Prince I will be the next Queen of Nepal. That is no joke. It already makes me nervous, even though we will not be getting married for quite a few years.'

'Of course,' said Sachi.

They stared again, Preeti at the sky, Sachi straight ahead, and so when Edna's mother came close to them and yelled, they were startled.

'Do you want me to get sick right here?' Edna's mother yelled. 'I have enough vomiting as it is with this endless morning sickness. Come right away, stupid girls. Just looking at you is making me dizzy. Do you want to fall into that hole, Miss Daredevils? Do you have no consideration for your mothers? Stupid girls.' Sachi ignored her. Preeti rolled on to her stomach and tried braiding the shamrocks she had collected. 'Right away or I will vomit in a second,' yelled Edna's mother. 'Why don't you go to the Ringroad and wait for the procession? You will miss it and pester everyone forever.' Then Edna's mother turned around and took the lane back into Ganesh Basti. 'I have had enough of this morning,' she said, her head disappearing as the lane dipped down, then reappearing again with the marigolds.

The girls inched back to the grass and put away their books. They stuffed the brown paper into Preeti's satchel. They put the scissors into Sachi's. The scotch-tape was a little away and they forgot to pick it up. It stayed round and transparent on the ground. They rose, dusting their sleeves, dusting the grass-stained backs of their frocks.

'Should we leave our bags here? We could come back and finish,' said Preeti.

'Thank you very much but no,' said Sachi, rolling her eyes, so they wore their bags. Sachi pulled out two blocks of fruit-burst and the girls chewed on the gum as they made their way to the Ringroad.

They did not stay long upon the lane, instead they cut into the fields, balancing upon the dikes. The fields were heavy, scented and deliberate with ripe panicles, and the air smelled of raw rice and raw leaves. The girls were similarly dressed in frocks with contrasting bodices and patterned slippers, but Preeti was untidy in her longish skirt and her flying hair, and Sachi was very neat. They were mindful upon the small, low walls. Sachi stepped accurately, Preeti tried to hop, but both were like tightrope walkers, aware of the dangers of falling into the water-logged paddy.

'Does everyone have periods at thirteen?' Preeti asked.

Sachi plucked a grain and gnawed out a single seed of rice with her teeth. 'You are too thin. Yours will probably come at fifteen.'

'Oh,' said Preeti. 'Does it hurt badly?'

'It is just very ewww,' said Sachi.

Then Edna's mother, who was still on the lane, saw them in the fields, half hidden by the thick paddy, and yelled out again.

'Do you girls want to die today?' she yelled. 'Get out of the fields. There are frogs there, and toads, and probably snakes.'

'Pregnant women are tedious,' Sachi said and the girls continued to walk, but from the corner of their eyes they could see Edna's mother waving her arms, so they got out of the fields.

'I hope we see Princess Shruti,' Preeti said, 'even though I have heard mean things about her.'

'What things?'

'When Princess Shruti was in St. Mary's School she forced her dorm-mates to drink a whole glass of water out of peanut shells. That is mean.'

'That is not even possible,' said Sachi. 'That is just stupid rumours.'

They walked quietly after that till they came to the Deep Dimples Video Store and Sachi started talking again. 'Last week,' she said, 'I was on the terrace and I saw some guys on the other side, you know, where that dirty stream from the slaughter market gets into the gorge, and I was like eww, that is disgusting, you know? There were like six of them. I wasn't looking or anything, or even really thinking about them. They were pretty far off, you know, but I could see them. I guess I was kind of blank in the head, you know?'

'What about the boys?' Preeti asked.

They looked around for Edna's mother and cut through a small field and emerged at the Ganesh Temple. They did their Namaskar without stopping or turning fully towards the gods. 'Nothing much,' Sachi said. 'They were there and I was watching them, just like that, without meaning to or anything, just to have something to do while hanging out the clothes. Then these guys started going into the bushes, and I was like eww, why don't you just pee in the sewer? I mean, what is the point of going into the bushes if there is a river of pee flowing right in front of you? But then I noticed they weren't going into the bushes to pee.'

'You could see all this from your terrace?' Preeti asked.

'Believe it or not, your wish,' said Sachi.

'What happened then?'

'They were not peeing. They were plucking leaves,' Sachi continued. 'I was just watching them casually, without meaning to or anything. The boys plucked leaves, crushed the leaves upon their palms and ate them, like tobacco. You know how it is? I figured I could see them from my terrace but they could not see me.'

They stopped before Baje Thapa's house, the oldest slant-roofed house in the area, and looked at the bougainvilleas arching over the main gate. Baje Thapa's house had the best flowers in Ganesh Basti. 'Sure they could not see you,' Preeti said. 'Not clearly at least.'

'Yeah,' said Sachi, walking on. 'Besides, they were a bunch of cheapsters and what did I care if they saw me or not?' She spat out her gum and pushed her hand into her pocket, fiddling for another piece.

'Must be doing drugs,' Preeti said.

'Rajiv says there is poppy growing by that sewer. Isn't it disgusting to be eating anything by the sewer? I wouldn't eat anything from there, not for a million bucks.'

'Yeah.'

'You remember when Uddip broke his arm and he said I pushed him?' Sachi asked.

Preeti nodded. 'That was mean of him,' she said.

'Well, I did push him. He tried to kiss my mouth so I pushed him and he fell and broke his arm. How stupid is that?'

'It's yuck,' said Preeti.

They saw Edna's mother again, now sitting with her husband on a wall and watching one of the new houses being constructed. It seemed to the girls that there was always at least one house under construction in Ganesh Basti.

When Edna's mother saw the girls she called out to them. 'Have you seen Edna?' she asked.

'No aunty,' the girls said in unison and walked on.

They passed Sachi's Chinese brick house with its green windows.

'He was there too, Uddip, with the boys at the sewer,' said Sachi.

'How do you know it was Uddip. Weren't they very far away?'

'Oh,' said Sachi, 'I would recognise Uddip if he was sitting on the moon,' and she giggled.

'How can you see so much from your terrace? I can't see all that from mine.'

'If you don't believe me I don't have to tell you,' said Sachi. 'Besides, your house is not tall enough.'

They came to Edna's house after that. It was three storied and had English columns running through its length. Then, two houses later, it was Preeti's house and Preeti did not turn to look. She knew her house looked like a coop, like a poultry hole with its heavily grilled upper verandah and its rust coloured parapet. She knew her house, one storied and flat-roofed, designed after the houses in the flatlands beyond the mountains, was old fashioned and shabby amongst the new, slant-roofed mansions being built in Ganesh Basti. Her house was like a gourd in a garden of roses, unattractive and plain. 'Let them eat drugs by the sewer,' she said. 'What is it to you?'

'They were a bunch of goofers, that is what. So, I am watching and thinking that they can't see me. Then someone starts pointing at me and I think, oh, what does it matter? I must look so small from so far. So I keep spreading out the clothes. And you cannot even imagine what happened next. This one guy—his hair was all long and all, this guy, he pulls something out of his pocket and starts looking through it. I think it was a pair of binoculars.'

'Oh?'

'Yup! These guys must be watching women through windows, movie style.'

'Yuck!'

'I know,' Sachi giggled. 'It's totally eww, isn't it? Then they passed the binoculars around and I was so embarrassed about being in shorts. Thank god my shirt was a loose one. Whosoever heard of binoculars being so readily available?'

Preeti had never seen real binoculars in her life. 'Next time don't wear shorts then,' she said.

'You are an idiot,' Sachi said, still giggling. 'They were so irritating I stuck my tongue out at them.'

'What?'

'Yes. Then I gave them the finger.'

'What?'

'The middle finger, idiot. I gave them the middle finger, and they gave me theirs, and I gave both of mine back to them. Now,' Sachi went on, hardly able to speak. 'Now, every morning they sit on the Deep Dimples Video Store and when I pass by they stick their tongues out at me and call me their morning glory. I hate it that I was wearing shorts.'

Preeti stared at her friend and adjusted the weight of the satchel on her shoulders. 'You are mad,' she said.

And they were at the Ringroad.

The lane had been all brown, all dust, snaking through the neighbourhood, but the Ringroad was tar, briefly curving around Ganesh Basti like a deep gray carpet, graceful and attractive, the asphalt twinkling. On its one side, bordering the neighbourhood, was the Greenbelt with tall and light green trees and soft violet mimosas. Here and there, within the Greenbelt, were kidney shaped ponds choking with thick purple lilies and fat leaves so dark they were almost as black as the waters underneath. The girls had never seen what lay in those waters. If they went complaining to their mothers about lost balls, their mothers told them to play with something else. 'That water is surely poisonous,' they said.

The Ringroad was like a dream, quiet and without a single vehicle upon it. The air wrapped around the mimosas and came off fragranced. Policemen stood on both sides, lined upon the sandy sidewalks. They stood at regular intervals, some standing at-ease and looking ahead, others working to direct transportation away from the street and into smaller, branching lanes.

Preeti wondered where the Royal Family was going to this morning. She had heard talks about India and about Pakistan, but she

could not be sure. She was always a little afraid for the King when he travelled. It was a dangerous thing to be King. Being a King meant being blessed and being cursed, and she was afraid of the people, the gods, the animals, the temples, and everything else that seemed to rule a King, the way they did not rule her. She was not cursed. She could go where she pleased, when she pleased. But His Majesty and his family, they were cursed. They could not go into certain temples, could not anger certain gods, could not perform certain rites. If they ever went into the Budha Neelkandh Temple, they would be bitten by the most poisonous cobra in the world and would die before they could ask for water to soothe the fire in their throats. It terrified Preeti, this complete vulnerability in His Majesty.

'Let's go,' said Sachi, and the girls started crossing the street.

A policeman blew his whistle at them. 'Stay where you are,' he said. 'It does not look any prettier from there.' He looked at Sachi and smiled.

Sachi rolled her eyes. 'Men are just eww,' she whispered to Preeti.

There were people gathered all along the sidewalks, waiting for the procession, and their noisy chatter had the policemen frowning and blowing their whistle at everyone. There were two mounted policemen on very tall horses, one on each side of the road, and the horses trotted rhythmically in place.

Preeti thought of Nepal and His Majesty as she thought of trees and their fruits, of skies and their birds, mountains and their clouds. She thought of His Majesty as moulded into the land, as Nepal herself. She adored the pictures hung upon the walls of houses, offices and shops, amidst oleographs and calendars of gods and goddesses, behind diyos and incense sticks, reverentially garlanded with strings of marigolds and amaranths. The Royal Portrait in her school was in a circular frame, His and Her Majesties seated in deep chairs, His Majesty wearing the traditional dawra suruwal while Her Majesty sat serene in green chiffon and gold. Princess Shruti, the Crown Prince Dipendra, and Prince Nirajan stood behind their parents, their hands folded before them like members of a choir. The Royal Portrait in the

school canteen showed His Majesty in an army outfit, sash across his chest, multiple badges and stars upon his shoulders. Her Majesty wore a sash too, and the badges, but her smile was gentle and she looked shy, like a little girl.

Preeti's favourite portrait was the one that came on TV before the programs began. His and Her Majesty were fully majestic on the screen—silver cape, silver crown topped with plumes of the bird of heaven, emeralds fringing the forehead, heads so high up it made her dizzy. This was the portrait Preeti had bought off the sidewalk from a woman who also sold candies and dried fruits. Under this picture of His and Her Majesty was a quote: ' The universe is woven and interwoven in Vishnu. From him is the world, and the world is in him.'

It baffled Preeti that none of the walls in her own house had pictures of the Royal Family. She had asked her mother once and her mother had looked at her and said there was no reason to go banging nails upon the walls. 'Look, nails everywhere. There is no need to crack the walls with more.'

'Can't we scotch-tape a picture to place?' she had asked.

'The glue will ruin the paint nice and proper, leave square marks upon it.'

Preeti looked around. The paint was already ruined with age.

'We have all the gods on our walls,' she pointed out, tilting her chin towards the many calendars hanging from nails.

'King Birendra is not god,' her mother answered.

'He is. He is Lord Vishnu.'

'Lord Vishnu,' her mother said, emphasizing every word, 'is a nuisance. He reclines and rests on his snake and the snake swims all day on the ocean and your Lord Vishnu gets properly blue with pneumonia and stiff with rheumatism. Poor Lakshmi has no other job than to massage his legs day in and day out. If he stopped sleeping on a snake and started doing something more useful, it would be much better, no? Chronic pneumonia and severe rheumatism, that is all it is.'

Preeti stared at her mother, her mouth open. There were two Lord Vishnu calendars in the prayer room and one in the bedroom where this conversation was taking place.

Preeti had gone from her mother to her father. 'Papa, why don't we hang His Majesty in our house?' she had asked.

'Because,' he had answered, 'because we don't hang politicians here, that is why,' and he had laughed.

But Preeti did not care about her parents now. She had never seen His and Her Majesty in real person, and the possibility, however remote, that she might today, made her doubly anxious. She held Sachi's hand and stared at the street, unaffected by the policemen tweeting their whistles and scolding.

'Aren't they handsome?' Sachi said, nudging Preeti. Preeti turned to look.

The policemen were handsome in their glowing, creaseless, light-blue uniforms. Navy blue caps hid half their faces and only their lips and their chins showed under the helm of their uniform. The sky shone on their boots and their guns.

The policeman who had blown his whistle at them saw Preeti looking and said, 'Heavy bag you are carrying.'

'We have to have the books covered for class,' Preeti said.

'Why don't you put it down? Nobody will steal it. There are policemen everywhere.'

Sachi smiled and put her bag down but Preeti hesitated. No matter which frock she wore, Preeti felt shabby before a policeman.

'Put it down,' the policeman coaxed and she removed the satchel from her back.

'When will it come, dai?' Sachi asked.

'Any moment now, any moment. So keep it quiet and full of respect, won't you?'

The girls nodded. Preeti felt her heart fluttering in her head. Any moment now.

The Royal Palace started at Durbarg Marg, the King's Way, and finished off at Maharajgunj, the King's City, which meant the Royal

Palace was two and a half kilometres long. Just the statistics mystified Preeti. How could any palace be so long, and how could a family of just five people live in all of it? 'His Majesty will have to take a car simply to get to the dining room,' she said, talking aloud, and Sachi, who always understood everything right away, rolled her eyes. 'Imagine him in his silk nightsuit, Sachi,' Preeti went on, 'driving his Rolls Royce to breakfast. Of course, His Majesty does not drive his car himself, and there are many, many, many people living in the palace. His Majesty's breakfast is probably brought to him in his bedroom, probably in the Rolls Royce too! But still, imagine, what must a King's Rolls Royce look like?'

'You are the insanest person in the world,' Sachi said.

Preeti had read in one of the Royal Casino magazines at Sachi's house that His Majesty was the only person in Nepal to own a Rolls Royce. She had sat on Sachi's bed and flipped the magazine from first page to the last, looking for an image of the car, but there had been none and Preeti had tried to imagine it all: the insides of the palace, the insides of His Majesty's car, the lives of the many, many, many people within these insides. It was the difficulty of the imagining, of trying to count the 'many', that had confounded her—how many? A hundred? A thousand? She had imagined millions, but that would have meant the entire country!

'Do you think His Majesty will roll his window down and smile at us?' she asked Sachi now. 'And maybe we will see Her Majesty too, no? It will be so sweet.'

'His Majesty,' said Sachi, 'is probably in his palace right now, drinking whisky. Daddy says His Majesty drinks whisky without any soda.' Sachi's father worked at the Royal Casino at the Yak and Yeti and had spoken with almost every member in the Royal Family.

'You are an ass,' said Preeti.

'And you are obviously the most exciting person ever born, I suppose?'

'I don't want to stand with you,' Preeti said. 'And I don't want to be your friend. And I am only your friend out of pity. Edna thinks your legs are so long you look like a mosquito.'

And Preeti picked her bag and moved away. She walked towards a small crowd and as she walked she heard the far off rumble of motorcycles. She felt the tickle of their vibration in her soles and she started to run. She ran so she could stand near the mounted policeman and his horse. She had never stood near a mounted policeman before and she laughed a little as she ran, her anger towards Sachi vanishing as suddenly as it had come. Everyone else seemed to be laughing too. The motorcycles were at the turn for the Ringroad and their growls were still diffused but Preeti could hear them getting closer and when she turned around she saw them coming at the turn, two at a time, and she threw her hands up and jumped, unable to contain herself.

A man before her said, 'oho!' and clapped his hands. Other people clapped too. Some whistled. One cried, 'Ayo, aayo!' Another slapped his thighs. 'Right here!' he said.

The policemen stamped their feet and from the 'at-ease' transformed to the 'attention'. They raised their hands in a smart salute and the sandy sidewalk clouded under their boots. Even the horse stood still. Preeti held her breath.

'He is a god,' whispered a woman and held her son's hand. The son had long hair, almost touching his shoulders. He looked like someone who would eat drugs by a sewer and Preeti felt her anger against Sachi return.

The motorcycles passed two by two before her and Preeti faced the road and shouted out the national anthem, gloriously crowning His Majesty, praying for more glory, more success, more land to befall him. She shouted out the tune, and all the while she kept an eye on the long haired boy, all the while she dreamed of kicking him, of throwing him on the ground and breaking his arms the way Sachi had broken Uddip's.

The boy pulled away from his mother and ran off into the crowd.

'These motorcycles are like no other motorcycles in all of the world!' he said. He kicked one leg and shouted 'bhata-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta,' in imitation of the motorcycles. A few adults whacked him on his head for being a nuisance but he did not stop.

Preeti looked around for Sachi but she was nowhere.

The motorcycles really were like no other in the world. They were very big and very blue-black with red and blue lights blinking and dancing in circles on their heads. The riders, mysterious and unknowable under large, all enclosing helmets, had to bend low to hold the handlebars. Their hands were hidden in black leather gloves. They sat upon their vehicles like men from the future. They did not speed past and were surprisingly slow, as though they too were looking at the crowd as the crowd was looking at them, but they were not really looking either. The motorcycle men did not turn once towards the sidewalk. They never looked any way other than straight ahead. The engines roared like beasts upon the road.

Somebody caught Preeti's hand and she jumped up in surprise. 'Oye!' she cried when she saw it was Sachi.

'Hello,' said Sachi, smiling. 'Want to race the motorcycles?' she giggled.

'No,' said Preeti, and then, 'I hate you.' When she turned back to the road she had missed the last of the motorcycles that went past. 'You just come and disturb me,' she said.

Cars followed the motorcycles and Preeti shouted out. 'The Rolls Royce!' she cried. 'There will be the Rolls Royce.'

A policeman turned around and shushed her. 'Don't be so noisy,' he said.

The cars were black but they looked blue under the sky. They had thin, silver antennae upon their hoods and they lulled the street with their soundless speed. The motorcycles had been so flamboyant—lights and sound and dark blue men in snow white helmets—that the cars in their polished blackness, in their monotone, were dangerous and somewhat terrifying. The steel antennae shivered in the air and sparkled like swords.

'Are you mad? His Majesty does not sit in any of these cars,' Sachi said. 'Men with long guns sit in these cars so if anyone tries to do fishy things they can shoot you right there. Dhickchiyaun!' she shot Preeti and Preeti glared in return.

'Why are you making gun sounds in the middle of a procession?' Preeti said.

The first four cars passed and more motorcycles came by. The pattern alternated. Motorcycles-cars-motorcycles-cars-motorcycles-cars-motorcycles.

'Nobody can know where His Majesty really is, stupid,' Sachi went on. 'He could be anywhere. He could have been in the very first car, and he can be in the last.'

They talked softly, hardly above whispers, and Preeti felt the danger of speaking about Royalty while standing so close to policemen.

The motorcycles varied and some were green and white, but the cars sliding by were identical, black with silver antennae.

'It is quite possible that His Majesty is not in any of these cars,' Sachi said, keeping her voice low. 'Daddy says that it is possible that His Majesty is not in the country at all, that he has disguised himself as such and such and taken the local transport to the airport. Anything is possible, my little candy. It is possible that there really is no His Majesty and the pictures and the movies, the speeches on the radio, all of this was invented because we cannot invent anything else and because we like interesting topics of conversation. Anything is possible, flowerbud.'

'It is possible, dear cockroach, that you are mad and know nothing,' Preeti said.

Sachi snorted. 'I know everything, dear housefly. My daddy works in the casino and plays cards with His Majesty. I know everything.'

'Well then, dear flea on a dog, if His Majesty plays in the casino with your daddy then he does exist.'

'That too is possible, dear earthworm,' Sachi said.

The long haired boy came back to stand with his mother and Preeti glanced swiftly at Sachi. Sachi was looking at the road but Preeti felt the change in her friend. Sachi was different now. Her hair was longer, straighter. Her frock was shorter. Her skin scented like wood.

More cars and more motorcycles passed before her and though Preeti refused to believe her friend's periods induced boredom,

refused to be disheartened, she realised, rather quietly, that there was going to be no Rolls Royce on display, that Sachi was right, that perhaps there was no His Majesty in the world, that even if there was, Preeti would, in all probability, never see him in real person. He would not risk his life for her, would not roll his window down just to wave. She thought of the boys with their binoculars, and of Uddip trying to kiss Sachi's mouth. She imagined him at the Deep Dimples Video Store, sitting with his friends on the staircase, slumped, sprawled, taking up almost half the narrow lane. She knew that one of the boys played the guitar, and another had long hair, and one of them looked like Rishi Kapoor when Rishi Kapoor was very young, and that when Sachi passed them she twirled around, like that girl in the Cadbury ad, and her dress flew out and her polka dotted panties showed, and she was their morning glory. She knew Sachi would not marry her. She would marry one of those boys. There wasn't enough age difference between her and Sachi. They were only two years apart and there needed to be three.

'We will never see His Majesty,' she said finally.

The cars moved past, one after the other like a string of dreams, replicas of each other, and His Majesty did not roll his window down, and Preeti was a little disappointed in him for proving her right.

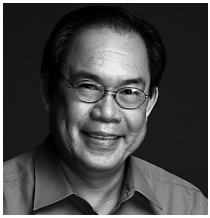
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Isabela Banzon teaches creative writing and literature at the University of the Philippines. She researches poetry writing and Philippine literature in English in the context of other Philippine languages. Her published work includes a poetry collection *Lola Coqueta*. She lives in Metro Manila.

Ankur Betageri (b. 1983) is a bilingual writer and poet, writing in English and Kannada, based in New Delhi. He has a collection of short fiction (*Bhog and Other Stories* 2010), a collection of short fiction in Kannada (*Malavika mattu Itara Kathegalu* 2011, Sahitya Bhandara), two collections of poetry in Kannada (*Hidida Usiru* 2004 and *Idara Hesaru* 2006) and one in English (*The Sea of Silence* 2000). He holds a Masters' in Clinical Psychology and is presently the Assistant Editor of *Indian Literature*, the literary journal published by Sahitya Akademi.

Geoffrey Bolton has been publishing writings on Western Australian history since 1949 and is currently completing a biography of Sir Paul Hasluck.

Sampurna Chattarji is a poet, novelist and translator with eight books to her credit. Born in Ethiopia, Sampurna grew up in Darjeeling, graduated from Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi, and is now based in Mumbai/Thane. Sampurna's poetry has appeared in Indian and international journals and has been translated into German, Swiss-German, Gaelic, Irish, Scots, Welsh, French, Tamil, and Bambaiyya. Her first novel *Rupture* was published by HarperCollins in 2009 and her second poetry book, *Absent Muses,* by Poetrywala in 2010. HarperCollins will publish her second novel, *The Land of the Well*, in October 2011. More about her can be found on *http://sampurnachattarji.wordpress.com/*



Jose Dalisay has published more than twenty books of fiction and nonfiction, and is a Professor of English and Director of the Institute of Creative Writing at the University of the Philippines. He holds an MFA from the University of Michigan and a PhD in English from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He has been a Fulbright, Hawthornden, British Council, Rockefeller, David TK Wong, and Civitella Ranieri fellow. His second novel, *Soledad's Sister*, was shortlisted for the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize in 2007.

Kellie Greene is a postgraduate student at the University of Western Sydney. Her current photographic project looks at the former Industrial and Reformatory schools in her homeland of Ireland.

Ranjit Hoskote is a poet, cultural theorist and curator. His collections of poetry include *Vanishing Acts: New & Selected Poems 1985-2005* (Penguin 2006) and *Die Ankunft der* Vögel (Carl Hanser Verlag 2006). His translation of the fourteenth century Kashmiri mystic Lal Ded has been published as *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded* (Penguin Classics 2011). His poems have appeared in *Akzente*, *Boulevard Magenta*, *Fulcrum*, *Green Integer Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Lyric Poetry Review*, *Nthposition*, *Poetry Review* (London), *Poetry Wales*, *Wasafiri*, and *Wespennest*, as well as in numerous anthologies, including *Language for a New Century* (W W Norton 2008) and *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Indian Poets* (Bloodaxe 2008).

With Ilija Trojanow, Hoskote has co-authored *Kampfabsage*, an account of global cultural confluence and a critique of the 'clash of civilisations' thesis (Random House/ Blessing Verlag 2007). With Nancy Adajania, Hoskote has co-authored *The Dialogues Series* (Popular/ Foundation B&G 2011), an unfolding programme of conversations with artists. Hoskote has been a Fellow of the International Writing Program, University of Iowa (1995) and writer-in-residence at Villa Waldberta, Munich (2003), Theater der Welt, Essen/ Mülheim (2010) and the Polish Institute, Berlin (2010). He is a research scholar at BAK/ Basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht (2010–2012).

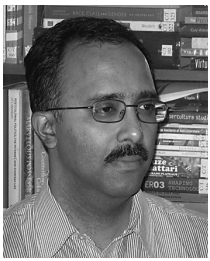
Shakuntala Kulkarni was born 1950 in India and has had numerous solo exhibitions there, including 'And when she roared the universe quaked'. She has participated in group shows in India, Bangladesh, UK, USA, Palestine, Nepal, Dubai, Singapore and Argentina, and has also participated by invitation in art residencies and workshops in India, the UK, and Bangladesh. Shakuntala lives and works in Mumbai, India.

John Mateer is a poet, art critic and practising Buddhist who grew up in an English-speaking family in South Africa and Canada and now lives in Western Australia. Mateer graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts and Literature from UWA. His poetry has been published and reviewed in journals and newspapers in Australia, South Africa, Indonesia, the United Kingdom and the United States. He has published several books of poems, the latest of which are *Southern Barbarians* (Giramondo), *The West: Australian Poems 1989–2009* (Fremantle Press), and *Ex-White: South African Poems* (Sisyphus, Austria).

Omar Musa is a rapper and poet from Queanbeyan, NSW, Australia. Born in 1984, he is of Malaysian-Australian heritage. He has lived in London and California and spends most of his time on the road, performing and writing. He has won numerous awards for poetry and music, including the Australian Poetry Slam in 2008 and the British Council's Realise Your Dream Award in 2007.

While living in London in 2008, he recorded with Mobo Award winning British rapper Akala. His first hip-hop record, the massive EP, recorded in Seattle, USA with veteran rock producer Geoff Stanfield, was released in 2009 to critical acclaim. Since then he has been a featured guest at the Ubud writers and readers festival in Bali, Singapore writers festival and the Sydney writers festival, as well as touring in Germany, Indonesia and around Australia.

He also published his first book of poetry, *The Clocks*, in 2009, and worked as an actor for the Bell Shakespeare Company. He released his full-length album World Goes to Pieces in 2010.



Pramod K. Nayar, of the Department of English, University of Hyderabad, India. He is the author of *States of Sentiment: Exploring the Cultures of Emotion* (Orient BlackSwan 2011), *An Introduction to New Media and Cybercultures* (Wiley-Blackwell 2010), *Postcolonialism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Continuum 2010), *Packaging Life: Cultures of the Everyday* (Sage 2009), *Seeing Stars: Spectacle, Society and Celebrity Culture* (Sage 2009), *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism* (Pearson-Longman 2009), *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction* (Pearson-Longman 2008); *The Great Uprising: India 1857* (Penguin 2007); *English Writing and India, 1600–1920: Colonising Aesthetics* (Routledge 2008), *Reading Culture: Theory, Praxis, Politics* (Sage 2006) and *Virtual Worlds: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cybertechnology* (Sage 2004). His work has appeared in numerous journals. Forthcoming works include a book on Human Rights narratives, a book on digital culture and a book on colonial discourse. He is also interested in superhero comics.

Goldie Osuri lectures at the Department of Media, Music, Communications and Cultural Studies, Macquarie University. Her research interests include analyses of nationalisms and transnational movements in relation to race, ethnicity, and religion through poststructuralist and postcolonial theoretical approaches.

Shalmalee Palekar is an Assistant Professor in the Discipline of English and Cultural Studies, University of Western Australia. Her research areas are transnational literary and cultural theories and practices; South Asian writing in English and in translation; Translation theories and practices (especially regarding poetry); Indian Cinemas ('Bollywood', 'Arthouse', Regional, and 'Multiplex'), and Queer/ transcultural formations. Shalmalee is also a translator of Marathi poetry, a screenplay consultant, and performs with three women and a cello, collectively called Funkier than Alice.

Shilpa Phadke is the Assistant Professor at the Centre for Media and Cultural Studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences Mumbai. She has been educated at Saint Xavier's College, Mumbai, SNDT University, Mumbai, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai and the University of Cambridge, UK. Her areas of concern include pedagogy; middle class sexuality and the new spaces of consumption; feminist politics among young women; and gendered public space and urban transformations. She has published in academic journals and books as well as in newspapers and popular magazines. Her co-authored book is titled, *Why Loiter: Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (Penguin 2011).

Smriti Ravindra is a Nepali writer currently studying in the USA. Recently she has co-authored a book with Annie Zaidi, *A Bad Boy's Guide to a Good Indian Girl,* published by Zubaan in New Delhi, India. Her work has appeared in *Wasafiri, Asia Writes,* and *The New Voices of Nepal.* She is also a regular columnist in *The Kathmandu Post* an English newspaper in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Named as one of the '50 Expats You Should Know in Malaysia' by *Expatriate Life-style,* Borneo-based American **Robert Raymer's** short stories and articles have been published over 500 times in *The Literary Review, London Magazine, Thema, Descant, The Writer* and *Reader's Digest. Lovers and Strangers Revisited* (MPH 2008), won the 2009 Popular Readers Choice Awards and been translated into French. His latest books are *Tropical Affairs: Episodes from an Expat's Life in Malaysia* (MPH 2009) and *Spirit of Malaysia* (Editions Didier Millet 2011). His blog *borneoexpatwriter.blogspot.com*, interviews, and book reviews are available on his website *www.borneoexpatwriter.com*

Ahila Sambamoorthy lives in Dunedin in the South Island of New Zealand. She obtained her PhD in English from the University of Otago in 1997 and then worked for a few years as a lecturer overseas. She is a mum to three boys and currently teaches music. Her passions are Early Keyboard and Baroque music as well as choral singing. She also writes poetry from time to time.

Mohamad Atif Slim is emerging writer from Malaysia currently based in New Zealand. He is currently a fourth-year medical student. Slim has works appearing/forthcoming in *Nimrod*, *Harpur Palate*, *Magma Poetry*, *Other Poetry*, and *Christian Science Monitor*, as well as an anthology from *Frogmore Press*. He also has a short story appearing in *Nature*.

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