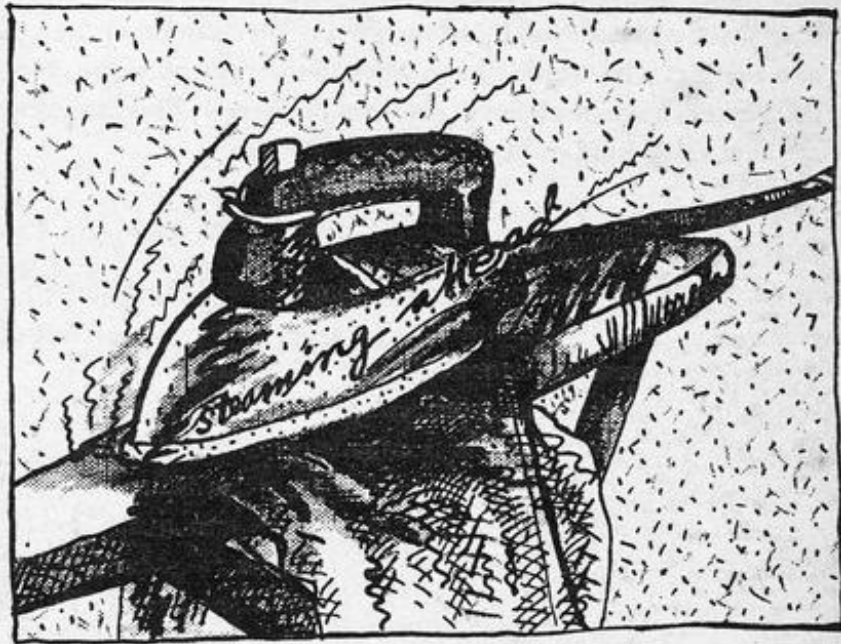


Groom

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The Asian Women Writers' Workshop is a London-based group that was established in 1984.

Its aim is to reduce the isolation of Asian women writing with few cultural precedents. All the work in this anthology has been developed through a workshop process, whereby each piece has been discussed and read by all members. The Workshop welcomes new writers who would like to work in this type of forum. Most of the writers have not been previously published. This anthology is the first of its kind to be published in Britain.

*RIGHT
OF
WAY*

*PROSE AND POETRY
BY THE ASIAN WOMEN
WRITERS' WORKSHOP*



The Women's Press

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Introduction

When we set out to get an anthology of our work published, most of us had never been published before. Even fewer of us had set aside time to devote exclusively to writing, so we were only able to write in what we believed to be inspired bursts of energy. Thus, an anthology seemed to be well suited to us and it also seemed the best way to represent all the talent in the workshop.

The workshop was formed in 1984, originally the result of lone efforts by Ravi Randhawa, who had managed to get the support of Black Ink and funding from the Greater London Council. Now we are getting financial support from Greater London Arts and Lambeth Council. The workshop was the first of its kind for Asian women writers in Britain, and was meant to draw out any isolated woman who wanted to write but needed a supportive environment to achieve this. The need for this kind of group was poignantly expressed in one of our early meetings when a younger woman, born in Britain, confronted an older woman who had just finished reading a moving story with the question, 'Where were you when I was growing up?' Did it take that long for 'immigrants' to feel settled and strong enough to want to express, re-order and interpret their reality for themselves and society at large? We were also working in a vacuum; there seemed to be no precedents to which we could refer. A few Asian women had been published, but not enough to set up parameters which we could break or work within. Organising as a group gave us visibility, credibility and access to institutions, publishers, and other groups in the community. The workshop gave us the confidence to approach

publishers, which as individuals we might never have done. It answered the vital question that haunted all of us: is my writing of any interest or use to anyone else?

In its short history, many women came and went but now a core group of around ten women appears to have crystallised. Although this provides continuity, it also leads to complacency, as most of us are familiar with each other's work, politics and style of criticism. It also works against our original purpose, that of attracting and supporting new talent. Perhaps the stability of this core group is itself intimidating to newcomers and we are constantly discussing and implementing new ways of being more welcoming.

Most of us have found the workshop process useful. It is a stimulus to write when all other methods of self-discipline have failed. You know that, within a few weeks, the other members will be looking askance at you if you have not brought any reading to the workshop. It must be said that many of us are in full-time employment and almost all of us have families to contend with, which means that time devoted to writing has to be negotiated. As this is not a paying proposition, our bargaining power is considerably weakened.

Suggestions and criticism provide new perspectives, new directions for work which might have dried up in your mind. What critical standards we are, and should be, using, are questions that have led to heated but unresolved debates. We tend to use personal statements to reduce the edge of criticism, so that a writer's work is not subjected to some implicit, universal, objective criteria (such as poetry having to have complex imagery). We have to ask who formulated these criteria, and are they relevant to us, as Asian women writing in a country where writers are recognised as great on the terms of white middle-class male critics. How do we evolve our own standards without falling into the other trap of venerating every word written by Black women purely because their disadvantaged position has reduced them to silence?

Though we see ourselves as British-based Asian women, not all of us were bred and born here, and we brought with us different cultural and literary influences. This affected our critical responses. Some of us found it difficult to appreciate translations of Urdu or

Bengali poetry. Anglicised responses to the style being flowery or sentimental demanded discussion and contextualisation. Short stories which were rooted in the literary traditions of the sub-continent were considered to have abrupt endings; further discussion revealed that the marked ambiguity of the endings was common to our literary traditions. Criticisms of work seemed to be much easier on political grounds. Positions were clearly drawn and we were able to say about the content, for example, this is classist, patronising, communalist, heterosexist, or whatever. But how did we respond to work where there were no political disagreements but where, for instance, a poem simply failed to move you? As a group we have yet to define our literary criteria. If you say of a poem that it is full of 'bald and simplistic' statements, that should be 'woven through images', can you be sure that this is not merely your own conditioned response to 'good' and 'bad' styles of writing?

This does not mean that there was always a consensus of political views. When we made the transition from a workshop to a collective, political arguments arose from the name we should give ourselves. Some of us suggested that we should call ourselves 'black' women to show our alignment with that part of the movement which believes that Asian and Afro-Caribbean women face a common oppression and that the way ahead is to fight together. Others felt that they had been squeezed out of black women's writing groups where the women were predominantly Afro-Caribbean and the implicit attitude was that the term 'black' belonged to them. Yet others felt that there were cultural differences which would make it difficult to respond critically and knowledgeably to Afro-Caribbean writing and vice versa. There was also the feeling that there was no Asian women's forum and that in order to encourage young women writing for the first time to join, our composition should be reflected in our name. Consensus was reached when it was said that we should work closely with black women's groups and participate in all events for black women writers.

The second big debate was sparked off by the word 'women' in the name. Were we not feminists, should it not be Asian feminist

writers? Many women felt that the word feminist had been sullied by the exclusiveness and racism of white middle-class women and, therefore, was no longer a useful term for us. There were such differences in our understanding of feminism that in any case the term would have been completely meaningless as a way of selecting new women to become members of the workshop. Also, it would have meant overturning the original idea of the workshop, which pre-dated many of us: the forum should be available to all Asian women. That these issues were not resolved was frustrating but also led to interesting debates in which work was viewed in a political context and the relationship between writing and politics became clearer. The very fact that we needed to set up a group for a particular section of society was an enunciation of the political realities that normally excluded women like us. Consciousness developed through the workshop process of our need to write in a particular way, to take into account our own class position when writing and to recognise the way in which this distorted our perceptions, and of our need for positive but realistic images of Asian women.

More recently, we found that the open door policy had to be changed. It was simply unworkable. We spent hours arguing about the communalist and classist sentiments in the work of some members. Consciousness raising was futile when the gap was so unbridgeable. Anti-lesbian views were sometimes expressed. A resolution was passed that we as a group were opposed to racist, communalist, classist and anti-lesbian attitudes and writings so that there was some communality, some given assumptions, upon which we could build further.

Unfortunately, the anthology took up so much energy that some of the new women who joined after the manuscripts were submitted found it difficult to relate to a group which was so preoccupied with its own tail – its own finished product. Then we started to revive an earlier attempt to select work for a 'readings' collection, so that we had a ready pool of material to take with us when invited to do readings by other groups. This provided an impetus to write as well. However, the impetus was not strong enough. We have now started negotiations with newspapers and

magazines to serialise a selection of new writing so as to stimulate work. We also invited women writers to talk about their work or to run workshops. Amongst ourselves we rotated the running of workshops where we set each other exercises. We found this very useful. It shattered all our romantic notions about writing only when inspired. It showed us that if we worked at something, even when we were exhausted after our day's work, we could come up with a fairly readable piece. It also redefined writing so that we saw it as a craft, a tool which could be honed and perfected with effort; it chased away any elitist notions of being born with a talent. In a world where literacy skills are limited, we were forced to recognise the privilege of our positions.

Most of our writing had been shared mainly by public readings, and this affected our style of writing. We felt that we had to be short, punchy, direct, rhetorical and dramatic. As our method of operation in the workshop was also reading our material aloud to each other and then discussing it, we never looked at our writing from the point of view of the written page, where it is possible to hold the attention of the reader with more complex structures. What was boring when read aloud for thirty minutes looked quite different when read privately. This became important when we launched the idea of an anthology: we had to see pieces not merely in terms of performance.

Preparation for the anthology also changed the aims and objectives of the workshop. We started to look at it as a launching pad for our own careers as writers. Practical problems had to be dealt with, such as finding agents, obtaining commissions, understanding publishing contracts, making contacts, gaining membership of writers' unions, approaching employers for fees, presentation of work. This narrower focus eclipsed our aim of developing writing in the community, of doing outreach work with Asian women in a wider context. This needs to be revived and developed. Perhaps this will come with our next phase.

The collective is open to new members who meet the criteria mentioned above and who present a piece of writing within six months of joining. Being London based, it excludes women living elsewhere, who may be even more isolated, but this is something

we want to try to overcome. We could share the skills we have picked up over the last few years with women who want to start groups in other parts of the country. Some of us are willing to travel to help in any way we can.

Pedal Push

'Man Beware! Woman Gonna Get Your Sanity.'

She should come one evening and rub it off.

As it was it pricked her mood to defiance and perhaps that's why she never did. Inevitably the lights would be on red, and as she and her bike came to a squealing stop, her eyes would seek their morning communion with the writing on the wall; and as the lights changed she'd carry it away like a frame for the day, stirring it into Colin's coffee as he rushed into the office and unwound from the morning's family feuding.

Today's argument had been about who was going to run the children to school and how he couldn't see why his wife couldn't do it. After all, as far as he could see she didn't have much work to do, with all the mod cons and labour-saving devices he'd bought her, not to mention Mrs Daily the cleaner, who acted more like his wife's counsellor than a cleaner; he supposed it was co-counselling, because his wife was hardly the one to sit quiet while there was talking to be done.

She listened and watered the plants and picked up the letters and in between sips and grievances his eyes ran their daily course over her body. She was dressed in a shalwar/kameez with a shimmering dupatta sliding over her shoulders; Colin liked a bit of exotica in his office.

'I've applied for that law course. Will you write me a reference?' she asked, settling in behind her desk and starting to rip open the morning's mail, much as she imagined his wife relished ripping into him. 'I like your wife,' she added for cold comfort.

Colin moaned as if in pain. 'What will I do?'

She supposed his cup was empty. 'Oh, you'll have lots of fun choosing a replacement,' lifting the coffee flask from near his elbow and refilling his cup.

Telephone calls, clients, typing: the mosaic of the morning's work filtered the time through to munchtime/lunchtime and Colin came out, having combed his hair and adjusting his tie. 'Switch the answering slave on. I'm meeting Paul at the wine bar. Want to come?' She shook her head and he smiled a knowing smile. 'The intellectual boyfriend?'

Pradeep was sitting near the back and didn't see her as she came in. She was always struck by a pang of disappointment when she saw him, his well-dressed executive appearance the very opposite of her romantic cravings for a book-carrying, scraggy-haired revolutionary who was going to sort out the world. Cliché! She knew; continuing, however, to nurture the hope that life would not prove to be as ordinary as it threatened to be. What was her mind up to? Disloyalty! Guilt-tripping over this brush with treachery, her hello smile oozed more than her feelings were prepared to give. His eyes lit up as he said how nice she looked, and, as his compliment acted like an erasure over her lips, he handed her the menu. 'I've ordered.'

Pradeep asked why she didn't marry him; he would finish his Ph.D. at the end of the year and was sure to get a good job. An American University had already approached him. Wouldn't she like to leave this place and go and live in the sun somewhere? She could carry on with her law studies if she really wanted to, but in a few years they would have to think of children.

No. No. Marriage was frightening. She had hardly yet tasted freedom.

'But there is no freedom,' he said, 'only choices, and with time choices, don't expand, only contract. Take me to see your parents. They will like me.' She knew they would and that was why for so long she had kept him so far away. He was a secret, for they would not approve of their daughter adopting a boyfriend; immodest and brazen behaviour! Unsuitable for their quiet, well-respected family. But if Pradeep went as the-man-who-wished-to-marry-her they would welcome him and forgive her. For he was all that

they would want and all that they would look for if they themselves were looking, which of course they were, except that they would not have aspired as high as a Ph.D. Their daughter was only a secretary, and arranged marriages must perforce take account of economic and academic compatibility.

'Bye' she said, fingers licking up the last of the apple pie. 'Can't be late.'

Got the rest of my life to live, can't let it come to a dead stop in the Pizza Hut, can I? Almost slipping over a banana skin as she stepped out.

Getting back to the office and wondering how many times she would have to come back before she could change circumstances and move on; half seeing a tall man straighten up as she approached, his outdated afro shivering in the cold.

'I thought this was an English practice,' following her into the office.

'Black coffee?' tones contemptuous.

'Not that you lot want much to do with any of us, anyhow.'

'Our lot,' tones statistical, 'get attacked more often than your lot, and your lot join up with them lot . . .'

'What's going on? A tribal war?' Colin, standing full and replete in the doorway.

They were both embarrassed into silence, that one word reducing them to their old colonial status.

'How can you work for him?' he asked as Colin disappeared into the office.

'How can you hire him as your solicitor?'

'Necessity is the mother of compromise.'

When he came out of Colin's office it was a 'see you Bombay, Baby' and a quick exit out the door before she could retaliate.

Days come and go, the seasons drift by, the files in the office turn round like revolving doors. She thinks one name is the same as another and all the cases merge into a blur of broken homes, broken limbs and a sordid saga of 'not me, it was him/her/they who dunnit,' till she felt like she was working in life's casualty ward. Colin told her she was romanticising, wait till she got married,

then she'd really find out what it was all about; she should count herself lucky she was having a dress rehearsal; and could she book tickets because wifey wanted to go and see some play, and if she herself was so inclined, to book herself one, too, the more the merrier, especially when wifey was around; and while she was at it why not get one for the cleaner; and it was only her look of exasperation that brought to a halt his plans for a drama of revenge.

Threats, not revenge, slithered through Pradeep's conversations: casually recounted anecdotes of the many who had loved, lost and lived to regret. Hints of the many who would be interested in as good a match as him, socio-eulogising on the system of arranged marriage and how parents more often than not managed to hit the mark, and wasn't it strange about the English? Strange for a culture that purported not to believe in fate, to rely on that old hack Cupid, who never had learnt to shoot straight, to provide them with their nearest and dearest . . . She felt as if a doctor was writing her a prescription and telling her she should be a good girl and swallow the medicine and everything would be all right.

'It's not nice to be alone in a world of copulating couples,' said someone in the supermarket queue, and she thought, so true, but could she, should she, even if she wanted to. Though her mother would say that obstinacy is a one-way road.

Her parents were talking about the future and their old age. They would go back to India, they were saying; it was the only place for the aged. They would sit out in the sun, letting the heat soak into their old bones, hire a servant to look after them, and spend the day in gossip and chit-chat; at ease at last, their right to be and belong unquestioned. She listened, and thought about herself and panicked. What would she do when she was old? Could she go back? But she'd never had a life there. No one knew her. She would be a stranger all over again, more of a stranger than here. What were they going to do? All the black people who were young like her but who would soon be old like their parents?

Tomas and his afro came in on Tuesday, right after Colin, early for his appointment, cutting short Colin's list of the morning's domestic disasters. Colin picked up his coffee and took his disgruntlement into his office. Tomas leaned over and placed two

tickets on her desk. 'Bring your bloke along.' How did he know? How many others knew? 'And will you come to my trial in one of your sparkly scarves? I'll be able to look at its lights in that boring courtroom.'

Colin said that Tomas would probably get a sentence, and though he didn't personally believe in stereotypes, as far as he could see Tomas was as stereotyped as anyone could get. She hadn't wanted to go to Tomas' gig but now she did and it meant a fight at home. They couldn't understand why she wanted to go off to this Black music thing; she knew it wasn't so much the music as the Black and she thought, something's got to change somewhere, and because Colin's forecast had scratched a foreboding into her mind, she wore one of her sparkliest saris and when she met Pradeep at the tube he wanted to know why she was so dressed up.

Tomas saw her in the glimmering dimness and, leaving the stage, came over to give her a kiss and asked was it bad at home and she replied yes and added, this was no better, ears droopy with disappointment. He promised to get her tickets for a programme of *ghazals* and self-smiling at this rip in his image returned to join the band.

The bike had a puncture on the way into work one day and when she arrived, wet, cold and miserable, Colin made her coffee and brought in a take-away lunch and she thought how nice he was, till his wife rang up and said did he only make lunch appointments with her so's he could forget them and Colin said, I haven't told you what happened this morning and she said she had a headache and could she go home early. He ordered a taxi but he didn't like not having an audience and she promised to advertise for a replacement the next day.

Tomas got six months and said it don't matter he'd get some reading done and she promised to visit him and he declined because it would cause ructions at her home. Don't matter, she thought, too, it ain't the end of the world, and who can say who's a stereotype? 'I threatened to immolate myself on the altar of their prejudice.' Pradeep's mouth froze open, kebab arrested half-way between plate and palate.

'How?'

She picked up a lettuce leaf and tearing it into shreds told him how she'd announced that she was going to get her hair braided and beaded. 'Mother said, "That'll be nice, the tribals in India do their hair like that." I felt like a squashed tomato.' He couldn't understand why it was so important to her. He sounded peeved. Engrossed in her explanation, she didn't notice. 'Because it's racism, isn't it? No point in beating about the bush, is there? There's not much morality on our side if we do it and yet criticise the whites for doing it, too.' His mouth had closed but she could see it opening again, not to eat but to interrupt. He didn't get a chance. 'I know it's complicated and not as simple as I've just made it out to be, and I know about the brainwashing from colonialism. But no one else can change us. We've got to do it, ourselves. It's no good giving people lectures. Practice and example, that's what's needed. That's why they've got to come round to being friends with Tomas.'

'Very commendable.' He left without making the usual arrangements for their next rendezvous.

Two months of perpetual pestering shifted the gears of her mother's prejudice, activating a samosa-making session, ready for when they'd visit together, and she laughed at this application of her mother's old family rule and ruse: 'If you can't talk to them - feed them.'

Colin's wife came to the office and said she'd seen the advertisement and couldn't she apply for the job? She sat right down and filled in an application form and then they both went out to lunch and Colin's wife said, 'I hope this isn't going to be seen as canvassing, though of course I'm sure the interviewing panel will be above suspicion.'

The next day Colin nearly choked on his coffee, just when he happened to be leafing through the application forms, and she had to thump him and thump him before he recovered, though all red in the face, with tears running down his cheeks. 'Why don't you postpone your studies for a year?' he said. 'You'll gain invaluable experience and be top of the class when you start the course.'

'I'll take those,' leaning forward and extracting the mangled

papers from his clutch. 'Some good candidates, don't you think? Have more coffee.'

Pradeep was pulling on her mind for a decision, and she said, 'I'm busy buying books. Come along and help me choose.'

'No can do,' he said, 'I'm off to the States.' She complained, justifiably she thought, that she'd just started her course and he smiled and replied that that was okay, he wasn't about to ask her to go with him.

'Oh,' she said. 'I think I need some sugar in my coffee,' reaching over for the bowl and like in silent slow-motion seeing it slip in between her fingers, releasing an avalanche of sugar over the table and on to the floor.

It took longer to cycle to college, but the exercise helped the pain in her heart. Why didn't you go with him, asked the wheels each day as they turned around, he was only waiting for you to say so. 'He could have waited for me anyhow,' pumping the wheels harder to drown their chatter, but they came straight back and said, he asked you, didn't he, couldn't do no more. 'He only asked for what he wanted. Everything had to be his way. He could have waited till I'd finished.' The wheels lifted over a bump and flinging her forward told her he'd really cared, over the years, and if she'd cared she would've gone, wouldn't she? Wouldn't she?

'If he'd cared, he would've stayed. Nothing wrong with going fifty-fifty. I couldn't do it all his way. Do it once and you'll do it always. I wish this damn pain would go away.' The nights were getting dark early now and one night she bought a pot of paint and a brush and did some editing on the writing on the wall:

'Woman Beware! Man Gonna Get Your Sanity.'

Ravinder Randhawa

The Nightmare

'What's your name, dear?' Fariha heard the nurse's voice dimly. The question irked her consciousness pushing through veils of numbness which swathed her head. She thought worryingly that the answer would surface if only, if only she had a moment to remember.

'Farr-ee, Farr-ee,' she suddenly heard her brother's childish voice as they trudged through the muddy swamp, netting tadpoles with their mother's dupatta.

'Oh, Furro! Really! How many times have I told you people that these are not fish, they're tadpoles? Disgusting. Now go and wash your hands and face before your father comes in.'

But he was right behind them, fuming as he walked in. 'Her name is not Furro. Why must you people insist on calling her Furro and Farree? She's got a perfectly simple and beautiful name, Fariha. Now don't let me catch anyone calling her anything else but by her proper name. Her name is Fariha.'

Fariha felt a little puzzled as she looked up. Her father wasn't there any more. It was her husband Salim who was saying those words. 'I like to call her Fairy, though, that was my special name for her.'

'Doesn't she speak any English?' the nurse asked, looking at her pityingly as if that in fact was the worst ailment that could befall anyone.

Fariha started to sing in a low voice,

'Sing mother sing,
Mother can sing,
Mother sing to Pat
Pat sing to mother . . .'

She could still recall the face of her English teacher quite clearly, Colonel Mahmud's wife Margaret, her blonde hair dulled by the sun and her fair skin always looking a tortured red in the blazing heat of the summer. Everybody said how utterly unsuited they were. The servants had seen them sling plates at each other at dinner time.

'These English women don't know how to get along with their husbands,' her mother used to say. 'Marriages don't work without an effort. You have to work at them. A man is like a vessel, hard and unchanging, and a good woman should be like water, flow and adapt herself to his shape.'

She looked up at Salim's face. Hard and unchanging; he was hard. And then when his body hardens and pushes flapping against cold thighs, demanding to be contained, she must yield . . . She wondered about being a vessel herself sometimes. Would she break if she didn't yield? Must she yield even when her whole being revolted against each slithery panting thrust? They told me nothing about that, she thought angrily. But it must be all right. Not like that other time when old, dry exploring fingers chafed against her body, hurting her deep inside, accompanied by Uncle Jamal's rasping voice whispering, 'This is our little secret, little one, don't tell anyone. No one will understand.' She worried. What if anyone should find out about it? It seemed all wrong and dirty.

And then, Salim. Not saying much, ever, urgent, businesslike. Everyone must do it that way if that was the way to get babies. And the babies were lined up in tall vessels all along the top shelf of the path. lab. when they went for a blood test after she'd recovered from typhoid that year when almost everyone got typhoid. Tall glass jars full of clear fluid containing grotesquely malformed foetuses. Fazlu, the driver, had told her what they were.

'I suppose she's been depressed really since last April, when she had to have this abortion. She'd really wanted the baby, you see. I

didn't realise then how much. But we had to go in for a termination because Sunny, our youngest, got German measles. The test, I mean the amniocentesis, indicated some abnormality but she wouldn't believe the doctors. Kept insisting that the baby would be okay. I had to be firm. There was no choice.'

Salim's face wore an expression of sanctimonious concern mixed with apology for his wife's foolishness.

'And what is the matter with your right shoulder, dear?' the nurse asked Fariha after filling in the admission forms.

'It hurts, really hurts. But don't look at it, it's nasty to look at. It's where the bird got me, a nasty deep wound. That sharp beak, it was hard, so hard. It plunged deeper each time. Drew blood, I couldn't move, couldn't do anything.' Fariha was becoming shrill and excited.

'There's nothing there, darling,' Salim intervened, stroking her shoulder gently, but to his embarrassment Fariha cowered reflexively.

'Oh? What bird was this then?' Cool blue eyes sought Salim's glance.

'Well, you see,' Salim began, 'Fairy had this awful nightmare. Didn't you, darling? It was only a nightmare, wasn't it?'

Fariha responded to the sharpness of his tone with a dull nod. 'Yes, yes,' she mumbled, suddenly calmer. 'A nightmare, only a nightmare.'

Salim jerked his head towards Fariha and began in an ironic tone. 'All this business began with this awful nightmare.' He felt uncomfortable at being questioned. The nurse must think he'd been battering her. 'A nightmare about two birds, a huge, vicious-looking vulture and a trembly little dove. The vulture kept pecking with his sharp beak into the dove's wing and the dove wouldn't move, couldn't get away. It just stood there mesmerised, allowing itself to be tortured. Ghastly nightmare, she never told me then. Told Pinky, my daughter, I mean, our daughter, about it.

'Then the nightmare kept recurring. Sometimes she'd be too frightened to sleep. Now she's so confused she thinks she's the dove. There isn't the slightest mark on her shoulder though, you can see for yourself.'

Staff Nurse Smithers smiled to reassure him. 'I understand.'

Salim sighed, feeling a little vindicated. 'It hasn't been easy, Nurse. Come home after a long day to a place that's a pigsty and nothing to eat in the kitchen. It's been hard on the kids. Just accusations and tears, and hallucinations and tears and tears . . .

'I'm an honest and hard-working man. I worked my way up with my own two hands. It's not been easy. It was a struggle all the way.'

The nurse nodded sympathetically. Fariha sat as if in a trance. Salim wondered resentfully about her pathetic conduct. And now all this nonsense. Manchester in the sixties hadn't been exactly welcoming towards the crowds of cheap labourers who'd arrived fresh from the sub-continent. Lost amongst those hordes of rustics from the north, struggling to survive, desperately searching for success, and missing them all the time, missing Fairy and missing the children, missing the comforts of home for ten solitary years. And now look at her, what an old bag she's become. It was a shock when he saw them arriving at the airport; talk about the reality betraying the dream. She looked . . . 'fat' . . . his mind had hesitated over the word then. And so much older than she ought. And the children, too. They looked so dark and, for some reason, poverty-stricken. Much darker than he remembered. Yes, the sun bakes you, he reminded himself. They were toddlers when he'd left them. They must go to school now. Funny, he'd always thought they were all three quite fair. Sadly, he realised, in England they'd all be inescapably brown.

He'd consoled himself with the thought that Fairy could look quite nice if she cut her hair, lost some weight and got some decent clothes. He couldn't wait to get started on a programme of therapy for her. Operation Salvage. All the things she had to learn and all that she had to unlearn. Kids had been no problem from the word go. Picked up English really fast, loved the telly, really liked their school, learnt to work the gadgets in the house. But she'd been quite impossible. Depressed and apathetic, so slow, always so slow. He'd never realised before how dull she was, and clumsy.

The nurse was trying to talk to Fariha. 'Would you like to say goodbye to your husband now, dear?'

Fariha looked at her blankly. 'My husband is in England.' Then

her voice dropped to a whisper. 'He adores me. I get these blue airmail letters from him regularly. And money, he sends me money. Sometimes the money order can take ages and you have to wait and wait.

'But that's not his fault. It's hard for him, too, over there on his own. Life is hard in England. Last year when I sent him my photograph,' she confided shyly, 'he wrote some verses about me. I showed Nikki the letter and she said how lucky I was to have a husband who really loves me.'

Salim felt uncomfortable. 'I must go now. The children will be waiting.' He began to rush in embarrassed confusion, bending to give her a hasty peck on the cheek. Thanked the nurse and turned away, feeling a certain guilt-tinged relief at being able to leave her behind with the competent staff at Shendley. They'd be able to sort her out. Fancy telling the nurse about his letters. 'My husband is in England . . .' Where the hell does she think Shendley is then, if not in England? New Delhi, I suppose. He felt cross and irritated.

Fariha's mind catapulted her from England to Lahore and back with an ease which disconcerted anyone who attempted to converse with her. Alarmed, the good doctors at Shendley decided to launch immediately on a substantial programme of drug therapy which was so overwhelming that she forgot both London and Lahore and the problems she'd had to contend with in both cities, essentially alone, coping and struggling to cope. Forgot the loneliness, the frustrations and the daily humiliations of her ignorance. Forgot where she was, who she was, why she'd been grieving, and for whom.

She slept and slept and slept. Ate and slept. Sometimes Salim and the children came. If they didn't come she didn't remember to miss them. When they came, she barely remembered who they were. The children looked a little afraid and worried and Salim hustled about ineffectually. But she felt no emotion, no anger, no joy, no grief and no pain.

She did tell Salim about the drugs really knocking her out, making her feel dead weak physically. She was constipated and had an awful chesty cough which wouldn't leave her and she felt unable to think. But Salim would dismiss her complaints and tell her she'd

be better soon. What could be better than a hospital like Shendley? 'They all know what to do; this is not the mental hospital in Lahore!'

Fariha had no real grip on time. Six months slipped by but to her they sometimes felt like six years and at other times like six days. She would watch the long afternoons disappearing behind the tall green trees surrounding the hospital, wondering how deep their roots were. Dig them up once and they're dead. Driftwood and dead tree trunks lumbered her thoughts. 'Barren, like I've become, unable to produce a normal baby, when I *so* needed one. What's a woman worth if she can't even bear children?' She could hear Ma and Nanny talking about Zohra, whose husband had remarried because she wouldn't get pregnant.

Salim came alone to fetch her the day she was discharged. When she entered the house she felt almost triumphant to think that she still remembered where all the rooms were. The children were still shy of her. She became vaguely aware that Salim himself looked discomfited and very concerned about something.

'I'm all right now,' she said to reassure him.

Salim's unease grew over the next few days. Finally at the weekend he forced himself to confess.

'I have to tell you something, Fairy. It's not going to be easy. I hope you'll take it sensibly. I don't want to make you ill again.'

'I'm all right now,' she said, trying to allay a sudden panic which threatened to rise in her throat. Her hands reached automatically for her handbag, groping till they'd closed on the pink, triangular pills. A little breathless, she looked him in the eye.

'I've been offered a post in America by my company. It's an honour really for an Asian to be offered a plum post like that. I feel I can't really afford to refuse it.'

She thought for a second. 'If we must live abroad it doesn't terribly matter how far from home . . .'

'It's not that. It's just that they won't give you a visa.' Her stomach knotted up. 'You mean I can't come with you? Why?'

'Because of your history of . . . of . . . You being unwell, I mean.'

'So?'

'I wondered, if, I mean, I really thought, it might be better all

round if you went back home for a few months, maybe a year. It would do you a world of good. As soon as the doctor says you are well enough, you'll be able to join us.'

'And the children?' She felt close to tears. A vision of 'back home' flashed through her mind. A room in her mother's damp and dark flat, snipping round her own time and activities to fit into the family's schedule, reverting to her life of fifteen years ago.

'Well, the children must come with me. It's important for them educationally. And then you can join us later.'

He averted his eyes. The American Embassy official's words echoed loud and clear in his brain. 'There's very little chance, Mr Khan, I'd say hardly any, of *her* getting permission to enter the USA. They're fairly strict about this.'

He wondered pityingly about what could comfort her.

'They're older now, they'll miss you, but I think they'll manage. We managed on our own for six months after all, didn't we? This can't be any longer.' The dreaded tears and scene did not ensue, to Salim's surprise and great relief.

Fariha said nothing. She just looked absently at the pills and went to fetch herself a glass of water.

She looked puffy-eyed and drained the next morning. Salim asked her if she'd slept all right.

'Hardly at all. I think I need to go back to bed. I think I'll take a pill and try to go to sleep.'

Salim was concentrating on getting the parting in the middle of his hair exactly where he liked it. 'You see, I kept having this nightmare,' Fariha continued, 'a strange and horrible nightmare, about . . .'

'I know, I know,' he interrupted impatiently. 'Same old nightmare I suppose, about the vulture and the poor little trembly dove. What I can't understand is why the hell doesn't this poor little dove fly away?'

Fariha looked worried as she thought about it. 'Maybe she didn't because she didn't know how to. But now, I think she can't, because she's dead.'

Rukhsana Ahmad

The Debt

The plane was preparing to land. The captain's voice was muffled, but clear enough to ignite a rush of activity up and down the plane as everyone set about locating bits of hand luggage, retrieving seatbelts from under sleeping travelling companions, searching out lost shoes, or making a quick run for the loo. Freshen up pads doubled as waken up pads and finally all the plane's babies started to cry simultaneously, obliterating the last pieces of the captain's information and making sure that those who hadn't quite awakened now did so.

The young woman at the windowseat on row P appeared to be the only one not participating in the bustle around her. Instead, she sat packed and prepared, still and silent, gazing out of the small window. So still in fact that one could have imagined her to be asleep if it weren't for her alert posture and intent gaze as she peered out at the plane staircasing down through the clouds. When the plane leap-plunged she held her chest and smiled – and stayed in that posture until it finally landed and stopped, whereupon she pulled out a camera from the bag in her lap and snapped a series of quick shots. Then, leaning back in her chair, she let out a loud, long sigh.

Anjali Datta, twenty years old, was arriving in India as she had done many times before, but this was a special arrival – for the first time she was arriving on her own. Arriving as a grown-up, as an independent, autonomous, professional – well, nearly professional – at any rate, a person in her own right. It was all really a bit of a dream come true, and everything, but everything matched and mirrored her feelings – the plane's leaps were like the leaps of her

own heart, the pressure in the ears only served to heighten the already intense drone in her head which blocked out the world, and finally the dreamlike quality of the heat rising and quivering tenuously in the piercing sunlight encapsulated it all – she reached for her camera and quickly snapped it.

When the doors opened and the heat poured in she felt quite overwhelmed and imagined herself to be rising, floating, enveloped in warmth . . .

‘When we arrived, I felt light-headed and dazed in a haze of heat,’ She made a mental note to remember the formulation ‘haze of heat’ as she squeezed into the line filing its way out of the plane, much too slowly . . . ‘I really can’t describe the feelings of the arrival. I was quite calm until we landed, and then I could hardly contain my excitement and restlessness to rush – out out out – and into the sun . . . of INDIA!’

Anjali had long developed this way of voicing in her head simultaneous running commentaries of events and feelings. They took different forms and served different functions – they could be in the form of letters, a part of a story, in the first or third person, and ever since she had gone to film school, they had developed into all different kinds of voice-over styles. They served as a sort of emotional safety valve, a way of distancing, sharing, releasing intensities of emotion.

Once outside, the haze of heat was in actuality a glare blast. She groped her way down, squinting and hanging on to the handrail. But when her feet touched the ground, ‘Oooohh!’ she let out an involuntary squeal of delight, and automatically coughed to cover it up. ‘Ah, but no!’ she thought, ‘I don’t need to cover things any more. This is India, where I don’t need to hide, for it’s where I belong!’ She bent down to scrape up a pinch of dust, and would have liked to lift it to her forehead in a gesture of reverence – but felt too shy. Instead she gripped it between her fingers and quickly flowed back into the stream of travellers. Of course, the old freedom fighters wouldn’t have felt shy, she thought, and she tried to wonder what they would have felt – elation? joy? sacrifice? duty? destiny? – and which of these found an echo within her.

Anjali felt close to the freedom fighters and sometimes even imagined herself to be one. For though of course now India was free from the colonialist yoke, she had been taught that this was only the beginning and that much needed to be done before the fruits of that freedom could be reaped by all, for then and only then would India be healed and restored to her former glory! Brought up most of her life in the West, she had been fed on the diet of expatriates: of dreams and longing, of stories and legends and the whole larger-than-life dimension created by distance and desire. Her parents' feelings had transposed and she had grown up with the idea that she had a kind of duty . . . a mission . . . almost a debt . . . to India. This return held so much promise. She tripped along happily, adding a purposefulness to her gait and watching her reflection in the smoked glass of the airport building.

'Miss Anjali Datta from the UK?'

Anjali nodded energetically.

'I am V P Sharma. I have come from Dr Malhotra to bring you there. *Namaste.*'

'Oh, thank you. *Namaste,*' replied Anjali and as she hastily brought her palms together in the appropriate gesture the dust from her clenched fingers fell . . .

Mr Sharma took over, managing the luggage, and Anjali happily followed without even stopping to wonder how it was she had been located in the crowded terminal building. As far as she was concerned it was just part of the magic of India! Yes, like the wonderful web of family, family friends, and friends of family friends. The magic that had enabled her to come, unchaperoned, to an unknown city – for Bombay was virtually unknown – with a purpose of her very own, and an actual job to go to – she squealed involuntarily.

'*Han ji.* Yes? Did you say something?'

'No, no, I'm just happy to be here.'

'*Accha.* That is good,' smiled Mr V P Sharma.

The car drove along, and Anjali looked around her at the 'here' which appeared to be sea, sky, skyscrapers and slums.

'When you grow up you will go back to work in India.' She remembered her mother's voice. 'There is so much that needs to be done . . . so many people that need to be helped . . .' She was moved – by the memory and the realisation that she was here, at last, all ready and raring to go – to fulfil her own 'tryst with destiny!'

Anjali pulled out her camera and kept it ready in her lap, just in case, for any memo snaps. She then placed her imaginary camera in the front seat, angled, so that it framed her side profile looking out of the window. It was a documentary with her own voice-over:

'I decided to study film and media, basically because of the tremendous power of the visual image to communicate, educate, enlighten – to change. I always intended to come back and work in India, to make my contribution, to do something that would be of relevance . . . benefit . . . to the Indian masses. If my science grades had been any good I would have chosen medicine, or agriculture . . .'

'Cut,' she decided, as she smiled at the lie, recalling her squeamishness of blood and needles.

'But now, at last, I am here!' And she settled back into her seat to feel the sea breeze and to savour once again the set of circumstances that had combined and conspired to make this arrival possible. Pure magic!

It had all happened because Uncle Raj, an old family friend who had come to stay for a few days, had fallen ill, and so had had to stay a few weeks instead. Being housebound, he had to be visited, and so there came on the scene his network of family friends and friends of family friends, amongst whom there was someone who, in turn, had a family friend of his own who knew a man in Bombay making educational films for rural development. Combined with that, Anjali, now in her final year at film school, was looking for a professional placement for work experience. So letters were exchanged, calls made, it was learned that a new project was starting in which Anjali could participate, the director of the film school thought it was an

excellent idea, and they were all smiles as everything was finalised. Uncle Raj stopped over in Bombay on his return to tie up the details of Anjali's stay, which was to be with old Dr Malhotra, a doctor from old Lahore who was a family friend to them all.

'It really was a most amazing example of the right people, the right place and the right time,' Anjali had squealed delightedly down the telephone to a friend.

'Good luck and Karma,' corrected her mother. 'Whatever happens is God's will, and never forget to say thank you.'

Anjali smiled as she remembered, and opened her eyes to blink a thank you to the sky.

'Aha. You have awakened,' said V P Sharma. 'That is good, because we are nearly now arriving.'

Anjali pulled herself up to look. The scene had changed. The car inched its way along the congested street straight into and through the lives of people whose homes – hardly homes, refuges more likely – were along the pavements. Whole families huddled around bundles containing their meagre possessions, covered in dust and treated like dust, attempting to get on with the business of survival between the feet of the pedestrians, the fumes of the vehicles and competing for space and scraps with the stray dogs and cats.

Anjali let out a cry of dismay.

'Yes, they come from the countryside to Bombay,' explained Mr Sharma.

'From where? And why?'

'Yes, and they keep coming,' returned Mr Sharma.

The car stopped at the traffic light. Next to a flashy food hall disgorging satisfied customers sat a bewildered group of mother and three children. The juxtaposition of images was such that Anjali automatically reached for her camera, but as she started to lift it her eyes caught a look . . . a stare? . . . a glare? It pierced through her – she froze, her camera held halfway to her chest. As the car jolted forward, she relaxed it back into her lap and she tried to decipher the look . . . its meaning . . . her feelings . . .

At Dr Malhotra's, Anjali was met by Elizabeth, who took

over from V P Sharma. A brisk, bright-eyed old woman, she immediately poured forth a stream of information as she led Anjali through the apartment towards the sitting-room. The Doctor sahib, it turned out, had been called out of station with return delayed till tomorrow. But Anjali's room was ready, her bath water hot, and she could have a bath first and then tea, or tea first and then bath. Uncle Raj had called a few times and would be doing so again later, as indeed would Dr Malhotra, and the party she had come to visit would be sending a car for her the next day at four. She then went on to explain to Anjali, her tone conspiratorial, that she had been called down especially to be with Anjali, that normally she lived in Poona with Dr Malhotra's daughter, whom she had looked after for the last thirty years, ever since the child was two, and was regarded as one of the family.

'... So when you are coming the Doctor sahib come to me. "Elizabeth," he say, "I have a young girl from England and only manservant without English." I tell him no problem, I come.' She looked at Anjali knowingly. 'You come for meeting with party here? Yes?' and stopped talking for the first time.

'Yes,' replied Anjali. 'And I do speak Hindi,' she added firmly to set the record straight - she recalled the sweat and tears with which she had scraped her Hindi 'O' level, reminding herself of the freedom fighters, their courage and ... her debt.

'That is very good,' replied Elizabeth, bustling off to attend to something.

Anjali strolled out on to the terrace, trying to get a sense of ... everything. The image of the little street boy appeared before her, and the look in his eyes, which she was beginning to regard as a sign ... trying to say something to her ... it was the stare, so expressionless, yet so eloquent. Like her mother said, there really was so much to be done in India. Her eyes misted over; she wiped them on the sleeve of her shirt as Elizabeth returned.

'Oh, ho, Anjaliji, Babyji, what is there to cry about? You should not cry.' Elizabeth spoke in Hindi, gently, with empathy, and brushing aside Anjali's attempt to explain, she

continued, with a touch of indignation in her tone, 'I will come with you to meet the party tomorrow, or better still call the party here when the Doctor sahib gets back.' To Anjali's bewildered look she replied, 'Come, come now. You go and have a bath while I bring you tea. Don't worry about anything.'

The combination of the hot bath, sea air, jet lag and tea made Anjali dozy. She floated away into a timeless space of simultaneous dreaming, waking, sleeping, not knowing which was which, but during which she imagined herself to be making quantum leaps of awareness and understanding – with the look in the eyes guiding, teaching, transforming and sometimes merging with those of Elizabeth, who always appeared at hand . . . solicitous, tending, concerned.

Anjali awoke from her fourteen hours sleep feeling fresh and alert though still locked in the night's feeling of timelessness.

'A rather wonderful feeling of great stillness.' She started her imaginary letter. 'As I drank my tea on the veranda on my first full day in India, I understood for the first time why time is deified. Why it is called "Great Time". There definitely is something . . .'

Elizabeth interrupted her with her own commentary about who'd called when, and why she'd ordered English lunch . . .

The mention of lunch brought Anjali back to clock time: she had three and a half hours before her meeting with Mr Mathur of Apex Films. Just about enough time to get ready at leisure. She relaxed back into her thoughts.

'*Mahā Kāla*,' she murmured softly to herself, pleased that she had retrieved the word from her memory store.

'What did you say?' Elizabeth looked puzzled.

'I said, *Mahā Kāla*, Great Time. You know, it's one of the names of the Great God Shiva, and I had been trying to remember it.'

Looking increasingly puzzled, Elizabeth replied by offering once again to accompany Anjali to the afternoon's meeting – an idea which Anjali firmly dismissed with some irritation.

The car arrived on time. The driver came up and rang the

doorbell. Anjali was ready to leave. Elizabeth looked anxious as she watched her go.

'I'll be back soon!' said Anjali cheerily. 'You'll see. Before anyone calls again or Doctor sahib arrives.'

Elizabeth nodded, unconvinced.

Ziping along in the car, Anjali again thought about Time, about the Great Goddess Kāli, who was all powerful because she was the Goddess of Time, about the little street boy with his large, silent, staring eyes, about her destination, about what sort of a man Mr Mathur would be and what she should call him: Mr Mathur? Uncle? Mathurji? She decided the last one best suited someone engaged in rural development. 'Rural development,' she asked the sky, 'means the development of the countryside, doesn't it?' She conjured up the image of the boy with the silent eyes, and felt so moved that she spoke out loud. 'If the countryside were developed you wouldn't have to come here like a beggar to grovel in the filth.' The driver threw a backward glance, but Anjali was lost in her thoughts. Rural development! Clean drinking water! Land to till! Irrigation canals! The eyes assumed a look of gratitude. Her sense of purpose grew. She felt aglow with goodwill! She felt – a chosen one! Yes, like Joan of Arc must have felt when she heard the voices!

'Driving along in the car to my destination, I felt almost as though I was driving towards my own destiny. Ready to meet it, ready to learn, ready to grow . . .'

The car stopped. The engine was turned off.

'Gosh!' she exclaimed, 'Are we already there?'

The lift took her to the top floor and opened straight into the plush offices of Apex Films. Anjali let out a little gasp of surprise but before there was time to recover, she was thrown into another.

'Anjali!' A dashing-looking man around thirty strode towards her. 'So good to meet you at last.'

This wasn't quite what Anjali had expected. 'Are you . . . Mr Mathur . . . I mean Mathurji?' She stammered slightly.

He laughed. 'That's right, but there's no need for that formality. Just call me Matty, everyone else does.'

As he waltzed Anjali through to the inner office, he explained the history of his name. How when he was studying in America it

used to get pronounced to sound like Matthew . . . how he'd stopped correcting it . . . got used to it and it had just stuck and then even got shortened to Matty. Anjali noted the American twang in his voice but quickly arrested the thought, blaming it on her prejudiced English education. She herself was determined to be open minded and open hearted.

'Will you have tea, lemon juice or coconut water?' he offered. His smile was disarming.

Anjali slunk into the sofa to wait for the coconut water, delighting in the attention, her host's engaging ways, the comfortable elegance of her surroundings, and the wonderful sea view. She closed her eyes and threw another thank you to the sky.

'So, you want to come back and work in India?' Matty sat down in the swivel chair.

Anjali nodded.

'Good, good. There's a lot that needs to be done and a lot of scope. I liked your work . . . very promising.'

He really was so eminently huggable, thought Anjali as she tried to contain her childish squeals.

'Gosh, thank you,' she managed.

'Well, here, at Apex, we do a mixture of work. We do some advertising films, and we also take on contracts from the government. So the work is therefore both varied and interesting. In India you see, film really works. The people are very open . . . almost gullible . . . and it is a very powerful and persuasive medium.'

Anjali nodded. 'I am particularly interested in rural development,' she threw in.

'Quite right, quite right. That is a most important factor and one you will be working on. The team you will be with are away in the field and will be back in two days when you will meet them and be plunged straight into work.'

'Oh, good.'

'You see, in India we have everything. We have the technology, we have the know-how, we have the personnel and we have the manpower. We are the eighth biggest industrial nation and we need to project ourselves into the next century and take our

rightful place in the world. What has been holding us back is centuries of tradition and ignorance – and these need to be rooted out.'

'Tradition?'

'What's that?'

'I said, tradition?'

'Yes, that's right, and ignorance.' He swivelled his chair. 'Now, we have been given a large contract by the government. They are planning to build a large reactor in the interior around which, eventually, an industrial complex will grow. We have been commissioned to make a series of educative films to help pave the way. These will then be disseminated by satellite to the countryside around.' He offered Anjali a cigarette. 'No? You don't mind if I do?' Anjali shook her head. 'You see, these lands have traditionally been held by certain tribal groups and small farmers and these people will now have to move.'

'Does that mean they will be dispossessed?' interrupted Anjali.

'They will be – resettled.'

'Where?'

'The whole project will develop over a considerable period of time and many things will change by then. The point of the film is to help that change and to help the people adjust to the change. You get me?'

Anjali nodded unsurely.

'What you must understand is that this is progress – and that is what must be communicated through the films. They must be persuasive and reassuring.' He assumed a reassuring tone. 'It will provide work for the area because the labour of the local people will be required to build it and in this way they will be involved in participating in the change.'

'And when it's all built, what will happen to the people then?'

'Ah, that will be a long time yet. Many will be absorbed in the new complex and the others will be . . . resettled.'

'I see,' murmured Anjali.

'Progress has a price. Sometimes a heavy price, a very heavy price, indeed!' He smiled his disarming smile. Anjali now saw it as smarmy. A price which you will never have to pay, she thought as she surveyed the room.

'We cannot afford to be sentimental,' he cautioned. 'I think you will enjoy the challenge, because one of the things we have to do is to teach, to impart some of the most basic concepts of progress, concepts which you and I take for granted, but which to these simple, rural people are quite new and will transform their whole reality.' He reached out for a file. 'Like this – you'll probably be working on this one so you can take it to look through – it's about time.'

'Time?'

'Yes, about teaching the concept of time. The idea that time is money!'

Anjali jolted.

'Surprised, huh? Well, you see how a simple idea like that, which we take for granted, has to be clearly put over. That time is money is one of the basic concepts necessary for progress, and you have to . . .'

Anjali's head reeled. Time is money! Confusion . . . incomprehension. She heard no more.

Driving in the car, she had no memory of when she'd got in. The file in her lap, she lifted and placed on the seat beside her. She looked absently through the sky and saw the eyes looking at her, trying to say something – she didn't want to hear and dispelled the image by consciously taking note of the passing people, shops, cars, buildings, hoardings . . . until she finally arrived at Dr Malhotra's.

Elizabeth was at the door; her face became grave as she saw Anjali.

'Go sit,' she ordered. 'I'll bring tea.'

Anjali sat, feeling heavy and dulled. Even the commentaries in her head were silent. She could make no sense of her feelings. The image of the eyes reappeared, the look asserted itself and said, 'Traitor!'

'No, no, no!' she called out. 'No! No! And go away!'

Elizabeth rushed into the room exclaiming, 'Anjaliji! Baby! Are you all right?'

Anjali composed herself. 'I'm all right. It's just . . .'

'You're not all right.' Elizabeth was indignant. 'You should

never have gone on your own. I told you not to! It's not proper anyway! I heard you say no, and you must say no! You must not marry a man you don't like.'

Anjali was transfixed. Her chin quivered as she was just about to burst – into laughter, she thought – until Elizabeth gently gathered her into her arms, and she found herself dissolving into uncontrollable sobs.

Leena Dhingra

Baby Talk I

I cream your cracked lips
To coax you into a smile,
Instead you stretch your lips
Into a yawn that rips
Half your face, my little one;
I must change to camomile

You take hours to feed,
And in your greed
You don't notice your other end
You have shattered
the white of my dress
with your yellow and brown mess

I bury my face in your tummy
To hear the laughter that brings me close to tears
I close your mouth to make you say mummy
But when you see your father
You confirm my worst fears
You say da-da and burst into laughter

When I went in to deliver you,
Send me a card, she said, do,
I picked Michelangelo's 'Creation of Adam'
From my old decaying stock
The gender turned out to be accurate.
But who would've thought that reality would mock
Oh, damn - the perfection of art

And now that you are almost four,
I must recount the pains, the joy
But what are these to the grief I have known
When I was told that when you are grown
You may not walk, may not talk,
That you may be a wheelchair boy.

Rahila Gupta

This poem was written to commemorate the death of Balwant Kaur, an Asian woman who was brutally stabbed to death by her husband in front of her children at the refuge to which she had escaped. The Balwant Kaur campaign held a fund-raising memorial at which this poem was read out.

Blood-Lust to Dust

There you lay oozing
Blood ran cold, Blood ran dry,
A solitary fly buzzing
Stunned by the echo of your death-cries
Stifled by your blood-constricted throat
Brutalised by a knife's gyration

Sister, all your imagined wrongs
That moved his great hairy wrist
Insinuatingly through dark alleyways
Twitching inside an overcoat
Seeking your final submission
Calling out your guts

Children peeking, unbelieving
Your mother and I are talking
Blood-spilling
What kind of talking is that?
Let it be the last

You will not be consigned to dust
Time must not heal
Nor memory conceal
Your blood will not congeal
Our actions

This is not one more obituary,
Not one more nail
Sealing the covers of our oppression
This is but the lifting of the lid
That made us go on seething

Come, we will show men what fear is
When courage stalks a woman's raised fist.

Rahila Gupta

The Traveller

When, hundreds of moons ago, I slithered feet-first into this world, two tiny blue legs already kicking away the cord that bound me to my mother's womb, it was accepted by all present that I should become a traveller. In those far-off days in my almost-forgotten land, to be both a traveller and a woman was not considered a paradox. At one month of age, my mother began singing to me the songs of motion and movement taught to her by her mother. Into the perfect shells of my infant ears she poured out pictures in music, tales of people and landscapes so unlike our own, conjured up and coloured in through the light and shade of her complex rhythms and melodies.

At six months of age I could walk and climb, my feet seduced into premature agility, propelled by the growing wanderlust of my desires. At one year of age, as is our custom, all the women from our settlement were summoned to witness my naming ceremony. I was too heavy-eyed and drowsy with milk to remember the finer details, but Big Dadima still recalls the activity and excitement of that day when gradually, one by one, like galleons in full sail crossing the orange-red sky, the sisters and the aunties and the dadis and the phabis all swooped down to the entrance of our house on their huge, silver-tipped wings, bearing presents for me in their talon-tipped hands.

And such presents! Chachee Asha had captured and gift-wrapped a mischievous Caribbean wind; it buffeted the sides of its wicker box in annoyance and puffed bad-temperedly with its efforts. I vaguely recall how hot and spicy its breath was. Little Manju masi, small of wingspan but large of heart, had collected in a

jade and brass urn the tears of the crying blue mountain. In my country, at the apex of the mountain range that runs across the central valley joining east to west coast, there sits a blue mountain who is in love with a cloud. She is a monsoon cloud and only passes over the mountain range twice a year. On the first journey she is black, full, and heavy with rain; on the return journey she is light, emptied and smiling. But she never sees the blue mountain below her, and she never will. My old and many-wrinkled Dadima brought the most dramatic gift of all, the nose, lips and earlobes of a lying man. 'There he was,' she told us, 'standing in the marketplace selling mangoes whose worms had worms, and asking so much, too. So of course . . .' She made a slicing gesture with the tip of one graceful wing. 'It was a very clean stroke; he hardly made a sound.' My mother strung the nose, lips and earlobes on to a thin ring of silver, and I wore it on the third notch of my leather travelling belt.

So, whilst our sisters made themselves comfortable, fluttering and folding up their wings against the restless breezes that occur at such high altitudes, my mother handed round slices of mango and iced tea, giving gracious thanks to our guests for blessing us with their presence, and my name was decided upon in the customary way. A *thali* of clear water is set in the centre of the circle of women who, at a given sign, all draw up their wings in one smooth gesture until all light is blotted out and only the *thali* and their own thoughts remain within the circle. Upon lowering their wings a name, shining like oil on water, appears on the surface of the *thali*. Once I had been named, my mother from that day on would massage my feet, my hands, and the rapidly swelling stumps between my shoulder blades with hot mustard oil until, after some uncomfortable months during which I scratched and sweated and chafed beneath the pain of the new growth, my wings sprouted like a celebratory handclap and it was time for me to travel.

The morning upon which my travels began was, as I remember it, a most auspicious and crystal-sharp morning. I stood upon the threshold of our home and looked across the ravine to see the whole of our land spread out before me, as tiny and as perfect as an ink-drawn map. The fields, the trees and lakes, symmetrical and

many-textured, forming the carpet of the valley floor, enclosed by the rolling curves and hollows of the hills which, coming nearer to us, became snow-capped mountain tops which were our doorsteps and the stairs I would climb down into the land of the wingless souls to begin my adventures. My mother came out to join me. Her eyes were dark pools of sorrow for she knew much time would pass before my return, but like all mothers she understood the only way to truly nurture the strengths and talents of a daughter is to set her free. She placed her hand upon my shoulder, talons catching the new-day sunlight, and slowly folded her wings, a feathered flag of silver and grey rippling like a banner behind her.

'My daughter,' she began, 'you have all that you need.'

By then I was attired in my travelling clothes; sturdy, thick-soled boots would protect my feet from the potholes and sharp stones of the dusty roads that I would have to trudge along, knowing that I could fly the length of them in a minute. Knowing also that the weather conditions at lower altitudes would require some period of adjustment, my mother improvised a garment from a length of cotton cloth, winding it around my body and between my legs so that it offered both protection and freedom of movement. Amongst the tangles and curls of my thick black hair, which in those days hung in unruly snakes to the base of my spine, I fastened feathers from the wings of each of my sisters. When the wind passed over me each feather would whisper in protest, a thousand familiar voices singing out from the nest of my hair. And of course I wore, strapped tightly around my waist, my travelling belt, from which hung cooking pots, utensils, a double-edged dagger, herbs that would heal and poison, and the nose, lips and earlobes of a lying man.

My mother continued. 'You will see much in the land of the wingless that will amaze you. Your eyes will dilate to absorb these wonders, just as the *thali* drew in and absorbed from women's thoughts your maternal name. But you will also witness much that will sorrow you, your child-heart will be sliced into slivers like an overripe fruit, and your tears will rival the tears of the blue mountain. But these tears, like the miracles you observe, must be absorbed silently. Remember, you go as a traveller, not as a leader.'

I opened my mouth to protest but her eyes stopped the words as they sat on my lips.

'These women that you will meet gave up their wings a long time ago; many would laugh at you if you attempted to tell them of their forgotten heritage, and their keepers would try to kill you if they found out what you are, for they are a breed who tend to destroy what they cannot control.'

My heart already felt heavy with helplessness. Seeing my sadness, my mother gently stroked my folded wings, carefully hidden beneath the tightly wound material, and leaned a little closer to my ear.

'However,' she whispered, 'there will be some women, some, whose ears will strain to hear the music of your songs, whose eyes will detect beneath your disguise the shadow of a wing, and the rare few who will feel between their shoulder blades the pricking of feathers where flesh now resides, as if recalling some half-remembered dream from many lives ago. To these women you may be able to communicate a little of what our land and life is about. But be careful, child. Your vision is as yet fresh and unsullied, whilst they bear the weight of many centuries of conditioning, a burden much more heavy than a pair of baby wings.'

And with that, she pushed away a tendril of hair to kiss me on my wide, brown forehead and gave me a push which launched me, open-mouthed and exhilarated, into the pure blue air, wings tilted to harness and ride the powerful currents sucking me down, down, and away.

Travelling alone in the land of the wingless proved a much more complex task than I had imagined. Frankly, I did not realise that my appearance would provoke so much alarm and contempt; as far as I was concerned, my outfit entirely suited the rigours and demands of a mobile lifestyle. However, after enduring the insults and taunts thrown at me because of my walking boots (too masculine), my wraparound dress (too vulgar), and my hairstyle (too provocative), I gradually modified my looks in order to travel more freely amongst these people. I gave up my boots for ordinary open-toed sandals, although it took many moons of painful blisters before my feet adjusted to the flimsiness of the support they offered against

the hard, dusty roads. I stopped wearing my robe like a harness strung between my legs and instead hung the material in folds from my travelling belt so that my legs were entirely covered and therefore somewhat restricted if I ever needed to run or climb to a destination.

I also managed to coax my hair into some kind of order by tying up my curls into a loose bun with a length of scented creeper, and displayed all the feathers from my sisters' wings in bunches, swinging from the notches of my leather travelling belt. By modifying my appearance in this manner I was able to move fairly easily from one village to another, but still encountered attitudes that defied any kind of reason. When the land-bound dwellers saw that I was a woman alone, not under the protection of a keeper or guardian, they would regard me with suspicion.

'Has she no husband or father to defend her *izzat*,' the women would whisper to each other, standing in huddles around the village well.

'She emits the stink of shame,' the men would growl, squatting over their tiffin boxes in the midday heat. 'How she stares without modesty. Hussy!' But later on, whilst their women sat indoors in drowsy clusters, a child at each breast, the men would come silently one by one to my sleeping place under some tall tree and offer me a few coins for my body.

When I sang the songs taught to me by my sisters, rousing folk songs which beat out the joys of the freedom of flight, of unimpeded motion through the skies of a woman's desires, or *ghazals* of melancholy, longing laments for the ones whose wings had been clipped by the blind slavekeepers many centuries ago, they did not understand that I sang only for them. My gifts were judged poisonous, subversive, unwomanly.

'Go to the *hijiras*, half-man devil!' They would throw stones and shout in their deep, gruff voices. 'Half demon! Leave our women in peace!' As I left, I would see the women's faces peeping at me from the shelter of their doorways. In most cases the eyes were soulless, lost, not hostile but bewildered. In one or two instances I would glimpse something approaching admiration and suddenly feel a surge of hope. Perhaps, years hence, one of these women would be

crouching down kneading dough for the evening meal and a snatch of some tune I had sung, some word I had spoken, would come to her like a benediction, and she would cease her labour and be overcome by a sensation that would be very new and very old all at once, the pricking of sprouting feathers between her shoulder blades, and then she would remember the crazy woman who had visited her village long ago, and understand.

I moved on from village to village, through towns to cities, wide-eyed and absorbing all like the still surface of the water in the *thali*. By the time I had worn out six pairs of sandals I had crossed the ocean surrounding my island home, exchanging temperate winds and balmy skies for the sharp angles and muted shades of far-off, built-up foreign cities. My experiences in these cities were the hardest. There, on the streets bounded by concrete and glass, I saw many men and women seemingly working together, side by side, with no divisions. I looked hard into the eyes of these tall, high-stepping women with confident chins and hands full of papers who moved so swiftly – surely they were trying to fly!

But alas, on closer inspection I saw that their shoulders were not arched to support the span of two wings but hunched to bear up the weight of their guilt. For each time they tensed up their muscles, preparing to leap into the wide skies of their desires, some wingless man, a father, a brother, most often a lover, would bleat out for the comfort of a female hand, would point accusing fingers at neglected children, would issue warnings about the gossip going on behind closed doors. And then the woman would be torn in two, her heart somewhere in the clouds and her feet nailed down to the concrete floor. These women, I felt, had the hardest struggle of all. Yet there were many who listened to my songs, and in some I saw the light of understanding begin to glimmer in their eyes and they would look to their daughters sitting at their feet and smile a secret smile, making plans for a future flying career. That was a most cherished sign of hope.

It was an unwritten rule that I would not visit any place more than once; in some cases it would have been dangerous to do so but on a practical level I had so much to see and so little time in which to see it. However, there are exceptions to every rule, although

upon entering the grey sprawling mass of town in that particular rainy land, I never thought I should have occasion to visit it again. This particular town was depressingly similar to many of the others I had already visited in that vicinity, rows of small, squat-faced houses, many of them run-down and shabby, sharing a bleak uniformity only broken by lone, wistful splashes of colour here and there, a red door, a lurid ornament in a front garden.

It was a house with a few shrivelled flowers growing outside its door that I approached to ask for a drink of water, having travelled six hours without stopping. The woman who came to answer my knocking stopped short in alarm, seeing me. News of my arrival had obviously reached her door before I had. Upon hearing my request she pointed dismissively towards an old stone drinking fountain at the corner of the street. After I had explained that I never drew water from such sources as accusations of me poisoning the water supply inevitably followed, she called exasperatedly into the house and a young girl, presumably her daughter, emerged. She stood at least head and shoulders above her mother, broad-shouldered, muscular, with a long lean torso and square feet planted firmly on the step where she stood staring directly into my face. Silently she accompanied me to the drinking fountain, collected water in a metal bowl which she held out to me, cupping it in one broad-fingered hand. At that point I looked into her eyes and caught my breath. For the first time during my long years of travelling I saw, shining in the large black pupils, the will to fly and the knowledge to do it. With a swift gesture she placed one hand on my back and felt the shape of my neatly folded wings hidden beneath my robe, traced the curve from shoulder muscle to wing tip, letting her fingers ride the bumps of the tightly packed feathers, and said, 'Please sing me a song.'

I remained in that dismal town for a month, meeting the girl secretly in a scrawny patch of woodland behind her house. I sang to her every song I had ever been taught or even vaguely remembered, as often she would spontaneously compose lyrics and tunes of her own imagination. I told her every detail I could recall about my home land, explained to her how, there, she and I would be revered, considered innovative, powerful. She did not seem

surprised. She had felt the longing to explore, grow, fly, for many years but had learned through bitter experience to keep them silent, explaining how her mother had been frightened by her talk of travel, how her father and brothers would punish her if these ideas were to become public. I massaged her shoulder blades daily with hot mustard oil and reassured her that she was one of many I had encountered over the years fighting internal battles with her desires, that her desires were not madness, it was only because she was alone and unsupported in her needs that the label of insanity was fixed upon her, and that some day the wingless ones would be in the minority and the world would understand how good and logical and natural it was for young women to fly.

At the end of the month she seemed to have grown twelve inches at least. 'My father is complaining he'll have to marry me off to a Bhatan,' she giggled. We both knew she was joking, of course, she had seen and heard too much about the clouds and stars and wide-open spaces of sky to ever submit to such an earthbound idea. I explained to her that it was time for me to move on. 'Who knows? There may be another sister in the next town just waiting for me to arrive.' Before I left, she sat me down and shyly began unwinding her shawl, all the while smiling, smiling, smiling. There, in the centre of her jutting shoulder blades were two perfect brown stumps. I placed my hand upon them; they were warm and pulsing with new growth.

'You will come back one day?' she asked.

'If you are still here.' I kissed her on her forehead and departed.

It was to be seventy moons later that I would meet her again. During that time I did meet more young women who listened to my songs but not one of them possessed her intuition and clarity of vision. I thought of her often and felt a thrill of anticipation walking through the same stark streets on my way to the house with the faded flowers at the door. But as I approached the house I realised that something was wrong. The house was evidently empty; the old, cracked wood barricading the door indicated it had been abandoned some time ago. I approached a young girl who was standing by the water fountain. By now I was older and perhaps my wrinkles and few grey hairs presented a less threatening front to

many. I asked her what had become of the girl and her family.

She shifted uncomfortably before answering, 'They left here long ago. The daughter,' she lowered her voice, 'she brought shame on them.'

'Where is she now?' I persisted.

The girl's eyes dilated with fear. 'They say she has turned into some kind of monster and lives in the woods. She catches babies and eats them. That's what they say.' And with that, she turned abruptly and left.

When I reached the woods it was almost dusk, a warm, close evening with a bone-white moon just beginning to rise. I sat in our usual clearing and waited, listening to the few feeble crickets chirping and the rustle of the leaves on the brittle-thin trees. I did not have to wait long. There was a deep loud cry, so full of longing and loss that circles of pain reverberated through the heavy-hanging air like ripples extending from a pebble dropped into water, and she swooped into the clearing on huge black wings with talons of steel, ten points of light glinting in the shadows. Her hair was matted and hung in wild tangles, her skin was roughened and weather-worn from years of flying against the wind, and her eyes burned with the fire of unfulfilment.

'You said you would come back,' she breathed. 'But after so long . . .'

'I had others to see. You were not the only one.'

'I was the only one who knew. The only one who truly understood your songs and remembered them word for word, note for note.'

As if to prove her point, she sang a snatch from a free-flight *ghazal*, her pure voice bouncing off the tree trunks, throwing back a multi-layered echo which vibrated with energy.

'I sing my own songs now,' she told me.

'In here?' I asked her. 'Who hears them here except for the crickets and the wind?'

'Where else was there?' she cried out in anguish. 'Where else could I go? You massaged my wings into being but you left me no map to your land. You filled my head with dreams of soaring free but you left me living here amongst the wingless ones.'

She came closer, so close that I could smell the bitterness on her breath.

'Do you know, two months after you left, my parents married me off to a sixty-year-old tailor. I stayed with him but I never stopped singing your songs to myself whilst I cooked and cleaned and bore two children until, one day, I suddenly realised I could not remember one single tune, and my shoulders became hunched to carry the weight of my duties instead of being arched to support the span of my wings. So I left and came here to wait for you. And as I waited, I remembered all the lessons you had taught me, lessons of patience and trust and fortitude and faith that, one day, the wingless ones would be in the minority. And then I understood how futile it is to wait – for anything.'

I opened my mouth to protest but she stopped the words as they sat on my lips. She drew herself up to her full height; she had grown, she must have been seven feet tall.

'You go,' she said. 'Go and sing your songs and wait for the miracle to happen. I fly by night to other towns and sometimes even the cities and I sing my own songs and over the time we have been apart I have met and trained one hundred others like me. We do not wait. They in turn have been travelling ever further afield to sing their songs to others. In the daytime our wings are folded and hidden, we do not take foolish risks, but at night, when the wingless ones sleep, we are flying.'

In one single fluid leap she was up and gone; the last I saw of her were the black sails of her glorious wings as she crossed the impassive face of the moon.

Meera Syal