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

depth 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.

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.
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.
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.
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 wickered 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 un laminated, 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

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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.

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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

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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.

—From ‘East’ by Sampurna Chattarji