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Afternoon Raag

Written by Amit Chaudhuri

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Amit Chaudhuri

Afternoon Raag



ONEWORLD

A Oneworld Book

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10 Bloomsbury Street
London WC1B 3SR
England

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In memory of Pandit Govind Prasad Jaipurwale (1941–1988)

The doorbell rings. The music-teacher comes in.
He is smiling as usual. His body is smiling. He is
humming a complicated tune
outside, wind, light and rain revolve the landscape in a
shifting treadmill of shadow.
Inside, in the cool room, my mother and the music-teacher
sit on the carpet, as usual,
enclosed, in the drawing-room, by sofas and tables
and paintings and curios.

My mother plays the harmonium; she begins to sing.
Her fingers on the black and white keys make, of her
hand, a temple with many doors.
When the music-teacher joins in intermittently, he
shows what a strange thing the human voice is,
this tiny instrument in the throat, with its hidden
universe of notes, its delicate, inscrutable laws.
A raag, spacious as the mansion the rain builds,
enfolds—and sighs, like one of the elements.

Inside the great architecture of the raag, through the
clear archway of notes, world without humans,
two figures sit, each alone
—my mother and the music-teacher—enclosed by sofas
and paintings and curios.

The music teacher is listless today. He does not respond.
My mother is just a little irritated as she sings, but
she is afraid, too, of something she does not
understand.
The music-teacher has merged with the sofa behind
him, momentarily indistinguishable from the soft,
indifferent contours of the furniture,
with the disturbing patience and resignation of
furniture.
His wife, his widowed mother, his brother, his brother-
in-law, his sister, his four children,
the jewelled constellation that appeared at his birth,
are moving away from him. He is alone, sitting on the
carpet, leaning his back against the sofa.
Behind this moment of serenity in this small, calm
room,
with its clear, cool space flowing in and out of a
listlessness,
is something liquid and grieving, something that

cannot tolerate its own shimmering presence,
but melts away from itself all the time, like the giant
walls of rain, or tears, or something else.

The music-teacher is dying.
He does not know it, but he will be dead in less than a
year's time.
He will not see the rain again.
He does not know it. His ignorance of death surrounds
him like a halo, an intimacy with God.
My mother does not know it.
The rain does not know it.
The world is being washed clean by the rain.
Something in us, human but one with the season,
is also being washed clean, tear after tear, cloudburst
in silence.

Nothing remains but the human voice, this tiny
instrument inside the throat
endeavouring to carry a world inside it. Then, that too
becomes silent.
The raag, self-created galaxy of notes, sigh of the
elements, sighs like the rain, passes into nature.
We do not see him. My mother goes on singing, as
if unaware. He moves further away, not drawing

attention to himself.
We do not see him now, except as a shadow against the sofa,
merged with the furniture, the endless meditation of furniture,
his lungs filled with water, his face and feet swollen and his mouth smiling,
become one with the reverie of furniture.
My mother sits there, singing, the rain falls, melting from its own presence,
the moment perfected not by art but by mortality, the mortal moment, repeating and repeating its own life.

1

Each year, in Oxford, new students come and old ones disappear; after a while, one knows the streets and by-lanes, all of which lead to each other, by heart; in the north, no one goes beyond Summertown, and the road leading to London goes out via Headington. On the first day of Michaelmas, men and women in black gowns walk to matriculation ceremonies, and at the end of the year they wear these gowns again, unhappily, to take exams; then, after the exams, the town is nearly empty, and the days, because of that peculiar English enchantment called Summer Time, last one hour longer; and Oxford, in the evening, resembles what an English town must have looked like in

wartime, the small shops open but unfrequented, an endangered, dolorous, but perfectly vivid peace in the lanes, as the eye is both surprised by, and takes pleasure in, a couple linked arm in arm, or a young man conversing with a woman on a polished doorstep, and then the early goodbyes. It is like what I imagine a wartime township to have been, because all the young people, with their whistling, their pavement to pavement chatter, their beer-breathed, elbow-nudging polemics, are suddenly gone, leaving the persistent habits of an old way of life, the opening and shutting of shops, intact, a quiet, empty bastion of civilization and citizenry. It is because of its smallness, repetition, and the evanescence of its populace, that Oxford is dreamlike.

From the window of my room I could see a library and a faculty building, and a path, curving slightly, that led to a college. Students, dressed in the oddest of clothes, in secretive overcoats, in long and black primitive skirts, men with ear-rings, women wearing gypsy ornaments, would gather each morning for lectures, or pass in and

out of doors recklessly with books clutched to their bosoms, or sit on the steps in abandonment, as if they had forgotten their appointments. The path, which is flanked by hedges that turn bright red in the autumn, I could see far into; at one point, it ran over a canal, so that I sensed water there. This intuition of water came to me again when I was visiting Worcester College; it was an unhappy day, because I was still vacillating between Mandira and Shehnaz, falling asleep by one woman at night and spending the day with the other, but I had, for a forced, lucid period of time, come here to attend a seminar on Lawrence. On entering the first quad, I saw that the light—it was evening—behind the wall at the end of the garden was different; as if the sun had set there, so that I imagined a seashore and a horizon. Later, I learnt that there was a lake there.

Dr Mason's room was simple, with two sofas, adjacent to each other, and a study table, next to which there was a chair on which he sat. It was a well-lighted and warm room, but its colours were cool—furniture browns and

wallpaper purples and magnolias and greys, the colours that create, in afternoon light or evening shadow, the abidingness of an English interior. Three undergraduates, myself, and two other graduate students, sat on the sofa, while another undergraduate, bearded and with spectacles, placed himself on the window-sill and never said a word, but listened to the others' words, seeming to weigh them, and it was his silence that I deciphered for agreement or disapproval. Dr Mason was a polite, even kind, man, a very big man, not very old, facing us in his armchair. Some students had open copies of *The White Peacock* in their hands, and as we talked of Lawrence, extolled him, applauded him, and most invigoratingly of all, corrected him, it seemed both strange and natural to hear our own voices. The mind focused itself upon the sphere of the room and the table lamp, and then dilated vaguely and darkly into a consciousness of Lawrence-country, and then focused upon the room again, and this dilation and constriction went on for a long time, like breathing. An hour later, we got up to leave. There

was laughter, and a relaxed certainty with which we let each other go, almost released each other, into the night. How unique student life is, with its different rooms, its temporary enclosures and crystallizations, its awareness and memory of furniture and windows and spaces.

2

Early in the morning, light would frame the curtains of my window, although at times there was only a dull whiteness. When I parted the curtains, I would look out into the curving road to the next college, the closed doors of the library, and the pavements. The wind would make a piece of paper move, and, touching the window, I would sense the cold outside. As I am used to the sound of crows in the morning, this absence of noise would fill me with a melancholy which was difficult to get rid of because it seemed to have no immediate cause. It was only when I saw students, with their odd, comical gait, and their touchingly disguised sleepiness, walking down that road, growing, little

by little, in number as the morning wore on, that I would feel an at-homeness and pleasure in their rhythm. It was around this time that Shehnaz too would set out from her college and come down the same road, indistinguishable from the other students, but with her own thoughtful gait, a backward-lookingness, happy in a simple way in having this opportunity to walk to her library in Broad Street, and devote a fresh day to copying out notes, stopping at my room for half an hour on her way there.

She was, essentially, a lonely person searching for the right company, a wise little girl in a woman's body, dressed in black trousers, a blue top and a coat, and black sneakers. Her hair was long and striking and untidy; solemnly, she carried a file full of papers under her arm, and a clumsy, oversized bag whose significance was that there was a tiny packet of Marlboro Lights in it. She had been married once, very briefly, and then divorced; later, she had an involvement in Oxford which came to nothing. It was towards the end of this involvement that I first met her, through a friend, and then we

would exchange nods when we passed each other by on the bicycle-lined pavement of a street which led to a pub and a junction. Students, drolly crossing the street, or lavishly arguing, filled out the spaces in the street and the time between one meeting and the other upon this repeated route, so that the street, with its daily, inconsequential academic excitement and drama, has become indissoluble from the inner life of our early meetings, and Oxford, its climate and architecture, seems not so much a setting as a part of the heart of our friendship.

By the time she would get up to leave, the rest of the building would have woken up and be moving about. Noises were transmitted through walls and doors; a radio; a knowing, crowded murmur in the kitchen; footsteps in the corridor; the main door shutting; the firm but almost non-physical sound of footsteps on the gravel; there were many lives in the building made transiently one by sound. I had a feeling of being surrounded, as on a ship or a train, by personal routines and habits that would not be known again, that had their natural place in some larger, more fixed habitat, and the morning

noise had about it, therefore, the concentratedness, the temporariness, and the pathos of the noise of shared travel. It was at this time, after the sun had risen, and lives, without apparent reason, once more began excitedly, when there was shouting upstairs, windows opening, last-minute preparations, and a joy akin to that felt by passengers approaching a port, that Shehnaz would get up to leave, listening, with one ear, to the voices of other students, smiling at what they were saying. Everything they said she found worth listening to, especially if she had had a happy morning with me; she had an uncanny sensitivity to the presence of people in small spaces, in corridors, in doorways, as others have to landscapes, or to places. Being there in that corridor at that moment, as students sheepishly came out of rooms and vanished into the kitchen or the toilet, was a real experience for her.

Sharma lived in another room in the same building. Sometimes, in the morning, he would come down in his shorts to have coffee with me. Banging on the door in a forthright manner, he would enter, and

if I happened to be midway through practising a raag, he would sit quietly on a chair and nod and shake his head in vigorous appreciation as I sang. The irrepressible bodily meaning of the words 'to be moved', which we have come to associate with mental and aesthetic response, was apparent when one looked at him listening to music. Sometimes he would keep rhythm to the song, arbitrary temporal divisions that he slapped and pounded on the table, and when I had finished he would still be doing this, as if he could no longer stop. Later, he would walk around the room possessively, tapping the keys of my typewriter and reading aloud all the titles of the books on my shelf in order to make himself more conversant with the English language.

Once or twice, it happened that I had gone outside, leaving my door open, and then returned and closed it, thinking I was alone. But Sharma, in the meanwhile, had come and hidden himself in the clothes-closet, from which, at a given moment, he emerged explosively. Towards the beginning of our friendship, he had told me very seriously that I was to help him improve his English. He was writing

a thesis on Indian philosophy, but he longed to be a stylist. I would, thus, recommend to him a book whose language had given me pleasure, and he would read aloud passages from Mandelstam or Updike or Lawrence to me, either in the morning or at midnight, times at which I was sleepy, he reading sonorous lines in a loud and unstoppable voice, interrupting himself only to demand comments from me that were both fair and encouraging. His English had a strong, pure North Indian accent, so that he pronounced 'joy' a little bit like the French 'joie', and 'toilet' like 'twilit'. Yet this accent, I soon learnt, was never to be silenced completely; it was himself, and however he trained himself to imitate the sounds of English speech, 'toilet', when he pronounced it, would always have the faint but unmistakable and intimate and fortunate hint of 'twilit'. His sentence constructions were curious, with missing articles and mixed-up pronouns, but he compensated for these with an excess of 'Thank yous' and 'Sorrys', two expressions gratuitous in Indian languages, and therefore, no doubt, of great and triumphant cultural importance to him. His

reading practice in the mornings, executed with the single-mindedness of a child practising scales by thumping the keys, remains for me one of the most relaxing memories of Oxford; me lying on the bed and patiently listening, a time of rootedness and plenitude, even of equable solitude, for with Sharma one is always alone, listening to him. Mandelstam, read by Sharma, took on a different, unsuspected life, odd, cubist, harmlessly egotistical, and atmospheric.