

THE SON WHO WAS NOT MINE

Parijat

My house is on the main road; my room faces the street. Opening the window wide and watching the pleasant bustle going on outside has become a major part of my daily routine. I often watch from here, and I know all the passers-by. Office workers, students, sellers of bread and milk — I recognise them all. Let me tell you, this window is my pastime and it leaves me with no free time at all. This is not to say that I have spent my whole life there. Once it was considered a sin even to peep outside, let alone to sit by an open window. Then came the revolution in 1950, my father died, I progressed in my education, and gradually times have changed. Now my relationship with the window is intimate. Since I completed my education and started working in a morning school, there has been no-one to prevent me from sitting here and looking out.

I am timid by nature, and my watching from the window is not typical of my behaviour. I never speak to anyone, or look anyone straight in the eye. So far I have never exhibited affection for any person. I take no interest in anyone. I carry a heart full of ideals, but none of them are useful, progressive or practicable. Perhaps it is because my values are impatient and immature that my life lacks a firm objective. I take no interest in anyone, and no-one takes any interest in me. I am unique and strange. My life is as unimportant as that of a rock or a flower that does not bloom. I am not in the least interested in social tasks, conversation or literature, and so this window is my means of entertainment and pleasure. From my window I continually read the street, and immediately forget.

It is the beginning of Phagun. The day is bright and the sun is mild. I have just sat down beside the window. The office-workers have gone and the street is deserted. School has already begun; students passed by in ones and twos. A little further up the street there is a school where only boys are taught. Then I notice two young lads directly beneath the window. One is standing up, the other is bending down to replace his bicycle chain. They must be about twelve or thirteen years old. The boy fixing the chain looks up and sees me, and for a moment I stare at him. Then his face reddens and he runs away. Today is a special day, this watching is a special one. Today's contact is a special contact: I fixed my gaze on him and stared for quite a while. He may well run from my eyes, but I cannot forget him: the flickering eyes set in that dark face aroused a longing in me. His hair was tousled and fell in ringlets over his temples and nape. His smile was one to steal the heart: I cannot forget him, however I try. Somewhere inside I feel a restlessness, a pleasure. I don't know what this feeling is. I try to understand it, but I cannot. The window seems new, its view more pleasing.

And then I feel that I am ill.

What is this feeling? I have never felt so restless. I've never had anything to remember or to forget, and no problems to contemplate. I have been happy, too, in a way. So why this skittishness, now, at this age? Something I never felt, even when I was sixteen! As I have said, the arrival of this sensation, completely opposed to the monotony of my life, makes me feel unwell.

Since that day, I see him here regularly. Now I have a shadow to imagine, something to think about. Now I am less dull inside. Some fluid thing washes to and fro in my heart: I have melted inside. He comes and stands on the pavement, and looks up at the window. He sends his friend to buy something from the shop on the ground floor, then stands there pretending to whistle. If our eyes meet, he cannot prevent a smile from dancing about his face. He talks to his friend: an incomprehensible twittering conversation. His voice sounds as sweet as birdsong on a spring morning, as pleasant as the ringing of a little bell. My ears fill with

pleasure. He gives me contentment — yes, contentment. But the restlessness this new experience brings with it does not disappear. Question-marks come spinning towards me in ever-increasing numbers. Some emotion — affection? love? fondness? — makes me feel stuffy and uncomfortable. I realise that a house is ready inside me: a house without foundations, suspended in the air. I realise this clearly now, and I feel pain in my heart. Something is trying to spill from me. I speak very little, and so everything remains inside me, unexpressed. Gradually, my fondness for that boy is expanding beyond all bounds. I am impatient when I see him. I want to hug him, to kiss him on both cheeks, to play with him on my lap. The truth is, I want to wring him and squeeze him out. I am threatened by hysteria, I realise my mind is becoming unbalanced. The times have moved on: the power of people's desires has acquired some rights. If someone acts on their basic animal instincts, they are thought anti-social and immoral. A person's worth is weighed up in many different ways. One weighs oneself. I too assess myself thoroughly, since this experience has begun to seem like some human affliction.

I lie on my bed and I think. I am different from other people, my ideals are different. I was never touched by the restlessness of adolescence or the fickleness of youth. I never felt like loving anyone. The desire to marry never woke in me. I never longed to be a wife. I am unmarried and nearly an adult. Marriage is possible, there is a chance of it, but there is no likelihood of any marriage I would ever want. Anyway, I am uninterested in it. As I grow older, I do not look any more mature. No mirror has mocked me yet. I have heard that if you live alone and unmarried, your life fills with meaninglessness and indifference, and you develop a kind of sickness. I have felt no indifference, and whether or not this is a sickness I cannot say. I am not totally lifeless. I have heard, too, that people can become perverted at this age — especially those who live alone. Have I begun to become perverted? I panic, but then I reassure myself: people even call sacred love perversion when it spills forth at this time of life. I have read that a woman's body is a slave to her senses until she reaches thirty-five. The thought makes me afraid. I break into a sweat and I feel tense as I calculate my age: I have not passed thirty-five, I have not even reached thirty-five. But if I had married I could already have borne a son who would be just as tall as that boy.

As soon as the words 'a son' occur to me, I feel an earthquake. A veil of mist breaks open, a huge question-mark vanishes and my discomfiture lessens. I relax as several burdens are removed all at a stroke, and I find a new contentment. Some things remain which must be poured out, but at least I find I am more or less healthy. The next day, my sickness has lessened, but my thoughts have deepened. Again I have no time. The urge to hug and kiss the boy is still upon me. Is he my son, I wonder? Perhaps he is a boon from Nature, a boy who cannot remain deprived of a woman's maternal love. Women were mothers before they were wives, and so motherly love is exalted. A son, a son, everywhere I look I see a son. We speak of sons, but we ourselves are born as sons and as daughters. Everyone talks of sons, and I do too, but I imagine that everyone here has themselves been a son. I smile to myself at this thought. But before you can play with your own son, you need a husband. As soon as I think of a husband, I shiver, because a husband is something I have never imagined having. I find the very idea repulsive. In my greed for a son, I try to imagine having a husband. But it would be easier for me to die. I try to force something called 'husband' into my arms, to banish the image of a son, but the 'husband' escapes. That tall son still lies there in my lap. My sister has a small scrawny boy, but I do not yearn for him. I never play with him, because when I think of a son I think of a boy of a certain size. Then I doubt my maternal feelings. Some smoke rises up: it forms a question-mark in front of me — what is a son like, what is a husband like? They come onto the canvas of my mind year after year, as incomprehensible as modern art. But I am content, because seventy-five per cent of that distortion has fled from my mind.

It is the beginning of Phagun. Schoolboys play, throwing coloured powders at one another.¹ Now it is the school tea break and there are more and more of them. I am in the ground floor shop. Beside the shopkeeper there stands a pile of new books in covers. I inspect them and ask whose they are, and the shopkeeper answers hurriedly — he brought them here to sell them. My curiosity grows: such new books? Who brought them? He looks around, then he points — he did, that boy there. I see my ‘son’ coming in, grinning. I hesitate and feel awkward: perhaps mothers feel the same way toward their sons. I ask why he wants to sell them. To smoke cigarettes, to go to the cinema, the shopkeeper replies. A dark veil falls over my eyes, I feel myself sinking. But the shopkeeper breaks in — he asked about you, asked me who the woman in the window was. I feel vulnerable again: there is much to consider — books, cigarettes, the cinema — but I am unable to think. The red powder on his forehead casts a fiery glow into his eyes, and I too am red with shame. My ‘son’ stands nearby, smiling a delicate smile. Oh I cannot endure that smile, and so I escape. But I step lightly, my feet as light as flowers.

I cannot think about anything else at all. No doubt, I have gained something. That night I have a dream: I have just given birth to a son and I am ecstatic in my maternal pride. My son lies across my lap, too big to fit, begging people for money to buy cigarettes. I wake up, my eyes filled with tears, but the exhilaration of his soft touch stays with me. Unconsciously, too, I hide his wickedness inside me and I say — my dear son, you are so lovely. Perhaps mothers keep security inside their hearts to hide their sons’ naughtiness. What trust can one have in this modern age, in its morals and its progress?

My ideals have surrounded me and they shut me in. What has happened — am I a mother now? My nature has changed: I love a child in a picture. I want to hug a child who plays in the dust on the street. It is a full-moon day, the sky is clear and the sun is hot. There is a sense of restlessness in the air. I wait, hoping for the flower I have not planted. Perhaps it will bloom, despite the lack of soil and water. Then I hear a bicycle bell and I look outside. I see the smile on his face, and then I see his cigarette and hear his lung-spewing cough. I see his spittle on the clean street. I panic, but my eyes are dry: I am not a mother. The dark veil falls over my heart this time and I sink very low.

My sickness is growing worse. It is mental, but I cannot express it. I am educated, I act consciously. As long as I am aware of myself and my values, my consciousness will not let me be reduced to ash. Whether this is a mental disturbance, or a sexual disorder, it may well stem from some kind of love. To whom can I speak? This is not a problem which grows lighter when it is voiced, it is not solved when it is shared. I go on tormenting myself with raw emotion, like a hen trying to hatch out a plastic ball. But at least the hen acts honestly: I do not know whether my impulses are genuine or false.

The very end of Phagun. Spring breezes blow, agitating the whole of Nature. The midday sun is covered by a mist of leaves. I walk into town, in no great hurry, and come to the inn across the street. The owner is a spinster, sometimes pleasant, sometimes irascible, but extremely skilled in business. I glance over at her and then I wonder — what is he doing there? He has not come to drink tea, why would kids drink tea? And this place sells meat, pickles and alcohol. I shiver. My ‘son’ is joking with the manageress. He looks at me and laughs. The woman says — stop it you wretch! Does he mix with old women, too? My body shudders with another whiplash from his voice: I find that my son is growing up. But he is following me, ringing like a bell, twittering like a bird. I am sure that he is using the most vulgar words to comment on my appearance, coarse expressions to wound me in my most vulnerable places. Something huge disappears from my mind and I sink low, very low. This time the dark veil turns the whole world black and I begin to feel hysterical. I try to turn and say something, but

¹In the Spring festival of Holi.

I cannot. I don't know which of my ideals makes me hurry along, cursing the changes of the modern age, the education system, motherly love. The only thing I do not curse is my own cowardice. My face is creased with burning hatred and a feeling of inferiority. I know it from the trembling of my lip. I sneeze to dispel my claustrophobia, I shiver, feel cold and sweat. But my sickness seems to have left me, like a fever which is sweated off.

The outside world ends on the skyline, but what can I say of the world within? The mind's structure is strange. I am already quite well again: a heavy stone is gone from my heart. The thing that wanted to pour out of me no longer wishes to, and has fled. Something has been lost, but its loss causes me no pain. I no longer look out of my window, I no longer study the street. Now I have plenty of time to spare. Today I have spent the whole day reading the magazines I keep in a drawer. I have become very hard. The fluid which washed to and fro in me has frozen like water in the middle of winter. Now it will not melt, it will never melt again.

Original title *Maile Najanmaeko Chora*, written ca. 1962. From the *Sajha Katha* anthology, ed. Bhairava Aryal, Kathmandu, 1968. Translated by Michael Hutt.