



THE JCB PRIZE FOR
LITERATURE
— 2020 —

Longlist

These,
& Our
Bodies,
Possessed
by Light

D H A R I N I B H A S K A R

These, Our Bodies, Possessed by Light

by Dharini Bhaskar



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An exclusive extract from
the JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

*To Aayansh, the firstborn,
the light in my sky*

'What makes life life and not a simple story? Jagged bits moving
never still, all along the wall.'

—*Anne Carson*

'You remember too much,' my mother said to me recently. 'Why
hold on to all that?'

And I said, 'Where can I put it down?'

—*Anne Carson*

Preface.

*Tell me about the dream where we pull the bodies out of the lake
and dress them in warm clothes again.*

This, the inheritance of a night – Neil’s voice, his hand running over my own. ‘You’ll be there?’

An answer should come easy. ‘Yes,’ I ought to say. Yes, we’ll meet. Maybe we’ll live together.

Yet, even as Neil steps into a waiting taxi, retreats, his form a blur, I am reminded of a fact – one that’s quick to fade away. In a week, my husband will return. In a week, he’ll ring the doorbell, ardent and ship-soiled and wanting.

What to say as the husband approaches?

What to say to Neil?

Instead of recovering an explicit response, I dwell on a household’s semi-stories. I see before me Mamma with postcards that can’t be posted; Amamma stepping out of a gate, not turning back; Tasha-Ranja with selves that have vanished, dust to dust.

Every attempt at pinning down a reply evokes recollections of a family – Daddy, Rangaa, Janaki. I turn a rosary of names and half-names.

Maybe all of us are no more than Venn diagrams – our personal biographies and those of our relations colliding to create the teardrop of our selves. Maybe when we speak of genes, of the double helix of DNAs, of being heir to black eyes, idiosyncrasies, a voice, we also speak of coming into histories, reminiscences, a shared unconscious.

Maybe, to answer the most vital of questions – *you’ll be there?* – I need to not only understand my past but also retrace the stories of those closest. I need the big picture, a frame of deep time, vast swathes of space marked Before-Daddy and After-.

Perhaps I should start at the beginning –

Beginnings.

How it was late, and no one could sleep,

1.

This is how it begins – a girl of sixteen by the front porch. It's 1943, and she's pretty, the way those in 1943 would be, without wrinkles and sunspots, with hair, black and oiled, set into two ribboned plaits. She's plump – she *must* be – with flesh cushioning her elbows and knees and knuckles. She must also be without glasses, so her eyes peer at rimless objects and people – now at the man before her with a burgeoning rice-tummy.

'Sarojaa,' I hear him call – though I cannot associate her with the name, with anything apart from a made-up word, part Tamil, part babe-speak, *Amamma, Amamma*. I suppose she responds – it's what people do – though already she senses in the pit of her belly that things such as names don't mean very much. They change just like skin would – sag, turn colour, bruise, peel, shed – without permission, without warning.

It's mid-afternoon, and the sun smoulders in the south.

An hour ago, Sarojaa was in school, an outcast in a game that involved classmates, tight circles, and a chant that tediously went, in garbled English, *A-tisket, A-tasket*. Since she lacked the patience to break into a loop of bodies, clutch on to a pair of wrists, and repeat an all-too-simple rhyme, she did the next best thing – she devised a game of her own. It entailed sitting in a corner and studying the pure blue of the sky.

There was something about this girl that annoyed her classmates. Maybe it was her aloofness, that she did not implore them for an invite. Maybe it was that she could spot clouds – invisible, shape-changing clouds – denied to the rest. Maybe it was simply that in

her dhavani, three inches too short, sixteen-year-old Sarojaa seemed startlingly complete. Her eyes – always wide, even when she laughed rambunctiously – led easily to the bridge of her nose; her nose dipped into a plump upper lip. So, if you glanced at Sarojaa even fleetingly, there was an inkling that each feature would hook up, connect. And astonishingly, this is one attribute that has endured.

I'm willing to believe that Sarojaa was not popular with the girls. I'm also willing to believe that she was secretly observed, even admired by the boys – that there were those who could look beyond her budding adolescence and delight in the evenness, the staggering unity of her features.

Venu – and I must call him this because I can't think of any other Tamil-sounding name – was naïve enough to believe in things beyond the body. He was young – eighteen, if we must arrive at a number – with a fascination for things of one piece. Which made him linger by the school enclosure and watch Sarojaa in conversation with the sky.

It's possible that Venu had seen her earlier – arguing fiercely with her younger brother, the only boy in her family of twelve girls, about the colour of a common housefly, or pouring a pitcher of milk into a puddle to see if it permanently changed colour, or scrutinizing painted nudes by a tamarind tree while her mother cracked down on an errant offspring. The truth is Venu might have been watching her for years now, vaguely aware of the details – the defiance, the daily mutinies – that contributed to Sarojaa's allness, that made her a creature unlike the other girls, unabashedly spirited, unabashedly whole.

So, the more Venu watched her, the more he yearned for her actual presence, for the joys of dialogue, for the thrills of jousting and repartee, and it is this impulse that finally made him bound to the neighbour's, scoop up a handful of wild flowers, and wait near the school gate for Sarojaa.

Rangaa was not one for flowers, partly because he was already a man. Such dainty gestures were not to be expected of him. At thirty, he carried the world's expectations on his shoulders, and being a dutiful, submissive doctor of Ayurveda, he felt obliged to fulfil them.

Life had not been easy for Rangaa. Orphaned at eight, employed

as a doctor's compounder at eleven, married at eighteen, Rangaa's plunge into adulthood had been dizzying at best. But strangely, after the noise and clamour of a wedding, weeks had slipped into months with terrifying quietness, without incident. Twelve years had passed, and Rangaa had been unable to introduce a line of descendants, a brood of children to carry forward his name. It was incomprehensible, this failure. Night after night of uncomfortable, frantic coition with a woman who scarcely tolerated his body (the clumsiness of his mouth, the pudginess of his stomach, the stubbornness of his crotch) and who refused to disclose herself to him – she stayed hidden beneath her sari and a bed sheet that fully concealed her breasts – had produced nothing of value, not even sentiment.

Rangaa could endure many things – ninety-hour work weeks, obdurate patients, a reluctant spouse – but it was impossible for him to suffer the gibes of his neighbours, those with limber families that expanded at will, or the sympathy of friends and acquaintances inclined to ask the same question each time they chanced upon his shuffling figure: 'Good news yet, Anna? Good news?' Rangaa wanted to be the bearer of good news. He wanted desperately a clutch of burbling children somewhere in the background. He wanted runny noses and colic-ridden nights and the prospect of finding fault with a headstrong son. So intense was this desire that it interfered with his razor-sharp focus, made him take two wrong turns on the way to a patient's home, and reach a school enclosure. Inside, Sarojaa was seated – plump arms wrapped around plump knees pressed against a plump belly.

Rangaa noticed her – the keenness of her figure, its possibilities, its capacity to hold and sustain and nurture and yield. All at once, he sensed a spurt of anxiety, a quiver, a sudden palpitation that began somewhere in the nether regions of his brain and sped downward past his throat, his pounding heart, his belly, straight down to his bumbling loins. 'I must have her,' he decided and darted beyond the girl, the enclosure, the school gate, past a boy clutching a bouquet of wilting flowers.

Venu noticed Rangaa the way he would notice most things – distantly, as a smudge of light, rather than as a form with a sharp fringe of voracity. And it strikes me that this is where he erred. That

had he been a more acute observer, trained in identifying the language of bodies – the firmness in Rangaa’s eyes and the odd swiftness of his feet – he might have stopped the older man with a gesture, stalled his thoughts with a remark. But such things could not be expected of Venu. So Rangaa ran, unchecked and unopposed, through a narrow gully, across a waterless sewer, past a puddle still white with milk, beyond a tree hiding poorly produced nude paintings, to a house with a thatched roof and children pouring out of every door and window.

Now lithe with sweat, Rangaa stopped for the first time in minutes before a man slumped on a rocking chair, already overfull with two baby girls and rattles and laundered diapers. ‘Good news yet, Anna? Good news?’ the man must’ve asked, while his wife approached the doctor with the long list of ailments troubling those gobs of children – a sty in the baby’s eye, a stutter that slowed down the infant’s talk, the faulty vision of her son, the tiresome inquisitiveness of her oldest daughter.

At this point, I imagine, a mile away from that house infested with people and tetchy voices, the schoolgirls engaged in a game of rhymes decided to leave. And Sarojaa, reminded of matters beyond the sky, got up, dusted her dhavani, and rambled to the gate, where she saw floppy wild flowers (a splodge of purple and red), then a hand soaked with sweat, a body in an ironed shirt, a face framed by doubt. It’s true that Venu, a mathematician by profession, doubted a good many things – the findings of Ramanujan, the stances of Aryabhata. But now, for the first time, he found himself doubting the familiar, the everyday, the stock capabilities of his body – the capacity of his legs to support his torso, the strength of his torso to bolster his head – so suddenly, by that school gate, the simple physics of existence seemed awfully complicated.

Sarojaa, meanwhile, never known to acknowledge the complications of existence, and always too quick for Venu, raised a pert chin and an eyebrow (with the kind of smoothness Venu envied) and asked, ‘These flowers – they’re for me?’

Venu gulped, shocked by her effrontery, or stood still, terrified that a rising tremor would compromise the unity of knuckle-and-wrist,

or blinked and hoped that his stubby eyelashes would compensate for his overdry mouth. Or maybe, in a moment of acute bravery, the kind books and films are built on, he stood tall, rolled his tongue, and pieced together that perfect syllable – ‘Yes.’

‘Yes.’

And Sarojaa, at ease with affirmations, trained in the laws of high drama, laughed, grabbed the flowers, handed a satchel in exchange, and said in that voice I’m now used to, sharp like vessels clanging, ‘What’re you, there, standing like that for? Come.’

Venu followed on meek feet, stopped when he was told to, looked when she pointed skyward, spoke when she quizzed with a wagging finger, ‘Cat got your tongue?’

‘No. No.’ The conversation wasn’t quite the kind he had imagined – no room for logic, no space for the barter of coherent thoughts. Rather, words hopscotched from topic to topic, fact to belief. They spoke of birds and where they nested (‘On sun rays,’ said Sarojaa; ‘As if!’ said Venu); of mushrooms and the way they’d look upside down (‘Like Viking ships,’ said Sarojaa; ‘Like upturned shrooms,’ said Venu); of the sound of raindrops, the smell of sambhar, and the exact depth of the sea (‘Whale-deep,’ said Sarojaa; ‘You’re crazy!’ said Venu).

It was crazy, for Venu had experienced nothing like this. His mind unspooled, his hands recovered the joys of motion. As he mulled over the number of homeless dogs in the neighbourhood, he felt his free arm stirring, moving upward, over, against – sensing Sarojaa’s forefinger, its warm blush, its shiver, the way it coiled around his pinkie. Sarojaa, for her part, learnt of a new kind of touch, far removed from her brother’s nudges, her mother’s whops, her father’s assertive clench – tender, barely present, yet enough to make each nerve tingle.

Rangaa knew nothing of this sensation. But he knew mortification, he knew anxiety. Which is why he was at the house, opening his mouth slow-fast, fast-slow like a goldfish, trying to piece together a sentence, subject-verb-predicate intact. Till what emerged was a non-sentence, the kind that is known to erupt during a decisive moment and shape lives. ‘Your daughter, Sir, marry lovely I want to.’

The man slumped on the rocking chair opened his eyes wide, tried to sort out the hotchpotch of words and half-words. Then, showing the first signs of comprehension, he sat erect, studied the knots of bleary-eyed daughters, those in diapers, those in skirts they had outgrown, those learning the first of the letters, those squatting on their haunches, helping their mother scrub the courtyard, and one – that smudge in the far distance – who ruined family portraits, robbed milk, skulked by bushes like a rogue animal.

‘Which daughter, Anna?’

Rangaa, probably stunned by the force of his incoherence, raised an arm, moved away from the squawking of girls with bags that needed mending and hair that needed combing and elbows that needed bandaging, and pointed a feeble finger that landed plumb on the figure of Sarojaa squabbling with Venu.

‘You’re such a coward!’

‘No, I am not!’

‘Then climb that mountain with me!’

Venu – too shy to accept her challenge and much too shy to flee – stood rooted to the spot. So Sarojaa snatched her satchel, threw away the flowers, swore to teach a lesson to her lily-livered sweetheart. ‘Just you wait!’ she shouted. ‘You’ll see!’

If Venu had been smarter, he’d have climbed on to a rooftop and announced, ‘Sarojaa, you’re beautiful.’ If Venu had been quicker, he’d have clasped Sarojaa’s hand, smelt her hair, peeked into her blouse, and located the lone vein weaving in-and-out-and-in, holding together her body, each of her features. If Venu had been –

But Venu wasn’t.

I’d like to portray Venu as either clever or agile, perhaps even a little desperate, so he’d gain Rangaa’s pluck, his ability to gabble, rush to the house and scream the doctor down. But integrity would demand that I leave Venu alone, an obscure figure under a tamarind tree, and make Rangaa – ponderous, unassuaged Rangaa; Rangaa with a belly as large as Asia – the lead actor.

Rangaa’s finger now followed a muttering Sarojaa past the altar to nude paintings, another milky puddle, to the porch of a busy house. ‘Her!’ he disclosed in a moment of sudden lucidity, and the man on the rocking chair looked at his daughter, the most unreasonable girl

in his flock, the one who scampered down trees, bruised her legs, produced bills worth fifteen annas. *Fifteen annas!*

‘Her? Are you sure?’

And the mother, never one to be discreet, interrupted, ‘Yes...are you sure? You have a wife, no, doctor?’

And Sarojaa, baffled Sarojaa, only now beginning to comprehend the enormity of the situation before her, its implications, yelled, ‘What is this? Tell me, what is this? Chasing girls –’

The man on the rocking chair relinquished his seat, stood up, raised an autocratic hand. ‘Quiet!’ he shouted. ‘Running up trees and after no-good boys! Is this what I taught you?’

‘But I –’

‘Will you or will you not do as I tell you?’

‘Eh. Well. Perhaps.’

Ignoring the brazenness of Sarojaa’s retort, the man turned to Rangaa and asked matter-of-factly, ‘Anna, you want her?’

‘Why –’

‘Yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’

‘Good?’

‘Take Sarojaa right now.’

‘What?’

‘What?’ I hear the question posed by two people – one flabbergasted by the turn of fortune, one beginning to break.

From here, everything unfolds in jump cuts. And it is this lightning-fast montage that we acknowledge as the beginning, and that we repeat during weddings and family gatherings, not entirely, but in bits and pieces, with amusement and wonder.

There is a bullock cart, a man seated in it, Rangaa. There is a bundle of gold jewellery and fresh clothes. There is a woman instructing the driver, ‘The temple, third left, fifth right!’ There is the sound of drums. There is my grandmother by the porch, looking at something or someone – a timid boy in the far distance – while my grandfather shouts in a triumphant voice, ‘Sarojaa! Hello! Hello, hello!’

This is all we claim to know.

I should tell you, my household is obsessed with marriage. I should tell you, too, that it is quick to erase life's defining events outside of matrimony – the unrequited love stories, the short-lived affairs, the bodies claimed with rapture and curiosity.

It's what has made this family stick – the blessed art of forgetting.

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