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Translated from Nepali by
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assisted by
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April 1972 **Tanka Vilas Varya**

INTRODUCTION

Parijat has been hailed by her contemporaries as the first modern novelist of Nepal. She is a beautiful, intense-looking woman of thirty. Born on a tea-estate in Darjeeling, she is a Tamang, a Nepali tribal group of great antiquity but uncertain origin. She is a Buddhist by birth.

She received her early education in Darjeeling. In 1956 she moved to Kathmandu where she attended college and taught school until she was afflicted with a crippling disease which has made her an invalid. She has been writing since childhood. Her poems were published when she was nineteen and since then her short stories and poems have appeared in the literary magazines of Nepal. In 1966 her first novel *Blue Mimosa* was published and received the only award offered in Nepal for the best novel of the year.

Critical response to the novel was of two kinds. On one side were those who said the philosophy of the novel was decadent, its substance vulgar and obscene, its theme foolishly imitative of the West. On the other side were those who felt that Parijat had brought Nepal into the world of modern literature.

The social novel has not had a long history in

Nepal. It is perhaps 30 or 40 years old. Before that, narrative prose was derived mainly from the religious writings and sacred books of Hinduism and Buddhism. Even since then the hundred or so novels that have been written generally reflect the traditional values of religion and culture, sometimes in imitation of Indian literature, sometimes derived from the soil of Nepal. A few of the novels are considered good and the rest trite, but almost all of them accept rather than question the ideals and values of the past. The heroes and heroines are usually ideal in looks and behavior. Pure love and heroic action, especially of the famous Gurkha warriors, are celebrated. Happy, or at least sentimental, endings are the rule.

Thus it is easy to see that Parijat's novel strikes a new note here. She overturns most of the expectations raised by previous novels. Her main characters are anything but ideal. Sakambari is skinny, she smokes, she wears glasses. Her ideas about war and religion are iconoclastic; her ideas about sex are aberrant. Mujura, a less important and less interesting character, is the traditionally ideal woman who lowers her eyes when speaking to a man, blushes at indelicacy, breathes a loving and gentle nature. Suyog Bir Singh is not a typical hero. True, he is a Gurkha warrior, but one whose memories, released by Sakambari's goading words, are of guilt and misery. Their love affair is outlandish. The differences in age, in temperament, in experience make union impossible; yet though the relationship is absurd, the pain and frustration are genuine. Even the setting of the novel gives only glimpses of the

idyllic beauty of Nepal; it focuses instead on the unsettling life of the city. All traditional values are rejected because the world in which we find ourselves in Parijat's novel is not exclusively that of Hindu or Buddhist culture but the world of the alienated and the absurd.

The novel especially reminds us of Camus and his stranger. Parijat says that two of her favorite Western writers are Sartre and Camus because she has found in them an affinity to her own feelings about life. But she maintains that the characters and situations described in her novel reflect, at least metaphorically, the life of Kathmandu's intellectuals. She sees life in Kathmandu as complex, difficult and frustrating, just as the life of any city must be. In her novel she portrays it as an empty, sterile place where meaningful life has come to a standstill and the motions of life go on as a matter of habit and routine.

It is ironic to find that the new novel of Kathmandu reflects the emptiness of life just at a time when Kathmandu has become a hippie center for those who are fleeing the emptiness of Western life. Many young Europeans and Americans are turning toward the affirmation of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy to water the dry roots of their lives. But human nature and the laws of human culture are no different in the East than in the West. And to the extent that their society has become formal rather than vital, many young Nepalese look toward Western philosophy for renewal.

Sondra Zeidenstein

After our third meeting in the bar, he invited me to his home in Vishalnagar. His house was in a compound encircled by mimosa trees. It was noon when we arrived, just at the season when the trees blossomed with blue flowers. To the right of the house was a sort of garage in which an old car was kept. A little beyond it grew rows of multi-colored flowers. In between was a patch of green lawn almost covered with blue mimosa flowers.

On that spot I saw a woman of twenty-six. Unnoticed by my friend, I studied her coloring, her clothes, her height and weight, her expression, the way she walked, everything. In her white sari and sleeveless white blouse, with her long hair loose, she could not be called an ugly woman. Noticing us she glanced our way and then, without curiosity, walked toward the well. I am not the kind of man to arouse curiosity. There is nothing special about me.

My friend was saying, "The house is isolated, but it's not at all inconvenient."

"Yes."

Talking, we reached the front door. The blue flowers and the woman had vanished from my sight. He went on, "This ground floor is also livable, but no one stays here. It's empty." We went up the stairs.

Near the window of the second-floor hallway I saw another girl, this one about sixteen. I have no trouble guessing a girl's age. She was rather dark-skinned, but attractive in her tight outfit. She went down the stairs in something of a hurry. With my eyes, I followed her attractive hips but I could not see enough. We kept on going, through the second floor hall and up to the third floor. The window and the attractive hips had vanished from my sight.

Opening the first door, we went into a large, well-furnished room. There were some big couches, a few big pictures and, on top of a round marble table in the center, a bunch of mimosa flowers arranged in a vase. A glance at the vase reminded me immediately of a pair of legs walking on a patch of lawn. This vase must certainly have been arranged by those hands. A pleasant atmosphere filled the room.

He went on in the same way, "We have a small family. Please have a cigarette. . . My mother is living. My father died a long time ago. And my mother has gone to the Terai. So there are only four of us in the house now, not counting the servants."

I guessed: one, the mimosa flowers, one, the hall window, one, himself. And the other? Who was the other one, since he was not married. Mingling with the smoke from our cigarettes, my curiosity hovered in the air around us. Outside the window,

the blue, blue flowers of the mimosa were moving in the breeze. Maybe below them there was someone else.

He continued, "Besides my mother, there are three younger sisters."

One strand of curiosity came to an end. I listened attentively.

"The girl walking there in the garden is the eldest. Her name is Mujura."

"Mujura," I repeated to myself. Her name is as sweet as she is.

"She's had her schooling and lives at home. She's not married." I felt happy.

He began, "My second sister. . ."

"My name is Sakambari." Her voice burst in on us like a bullet. Startled, I turned toward the door and saw a woman of twenty-four. She was about five-feet-three, fair, with very large breasts on an extremely thin body. She wore gold-rimmed glasses on deep-set, sparkling black eyes. Her hair was cut very close to her head, in the style of ancient Hebrew soldiers, and her small, white lobes wore earrings of black stones.

She came into the room. The atmosphere froze. I wanted to laugh in turn at her name, her behavior, her looks, but my laughter also froze. In that atmosphere I could not laugh at all, I could not do anything. I saw quite clearly that my friend was embarrassed. He blushed, but tried to cover his embarrassment by saying, "This is my middle sister. She passed her I.A. exams in the first division, but now she stays at home because her health is poor."

He did not repeat her name and I had already forgotten it. I looked up when she said "Namaste" and saw her slender white fingers joined in greeting and her mocking eyes, just like a mischievous she-cat's, looking at me. Taking two cigarettes from the package lying on the marble table, she strode toward the door. The atmosphere had not yet returned to normal. My friend, perhaps in an attempt to cover up the whole interruption, called after her when she reached the door, "Bari, bring us some tea."

Who was this Bari? What was Bari who came like a landslide spoiling the orderly course of the introductions? I needed more time to think about her; here with my friend there wasn't enough time. To think about her I needed a room, solitude. My memory of the mimosa flowers was scattered. Now there was no reason to ask about the girl at the hall window. She must be the youngest sister, probably with some unlikely name. Her identity would have to remain dark that day, like the color of her skin.

My friend went on talking, but he seemed confused. Though he tried to smooth things over, he probably felt he was not succeeding. He took frequent puffs on his cigarette and kept looking toward the door. Pretending a cough, I got up and went to the window. For a while, no one came, not Bari or anyone else. A servant brought tea. For a long time we talked about domestic matters and government service. When, after taking leave, I went out, there was no one in sight from the room to the main gate. There was complete silence.

Our acquaintance grew among shots of gin and whiskey and with our intimacy I began to call him by his name, Shiva Raj. He was of mixed caste since his maternal grandmother's time, and he himself was the son of a Chhetri father and Gurung mother. He was younger than me in age and experience. We were equally matched only in our ability to fill and drain the shot-glasses. He could drink as much as I could.

He listened to my talk with great interest. He was very curious about me. He seemed to be fond of me and I had no doubt that he was being frank and honest. But I had not told him everything about myself and there was a very big question-mark about whether I was being honest with him. I wasn't really honest with my family. As a matter of fact, I was not even really honest with myself.

All he knew was that I was over forty, a confirmed bachelor, that I was an ex-mercenary, a casualty of World War II, that my home was in the hills and that it was my habit to pick up some temporary work in government service when I wanted

it and to drop it again when I wanted leisure. I was almost forty-six, but he did not know that because I look a little younger than my age. Once in the bar I told him more – that I had joined the army partly out of interest, partly because my parents wanted me to, partly because my warrior blood was aroused. That after a while because of some kind of skin disease, maybe scabies, I was discharged from the army and was able to draw a pension. That up to now I had not married. As I said that, my expression changed but under the influence of whiskey he did not notice. That was all he was able to learn. We usually talked more about other people's affairs than about our own.

After he had lifted one curtain by inviting me to his house, we became more intimate. On this basis, I made a lot of guesses about his domestic affairs. I was not satisfied with what he had told me, so I used to imagine all sorts of things. This was a bad habit of mine.

I also invited him to my house. On that evening, warming up, I felt like talking. After a lot of small talk, he asked me: "Isn't it dull for you to hang around here this way after your experiences in the war?"

I emptied my glass. "There was nothing special in my army record. It was just luck that I was made a Subedar. It was only because I did a decent job in the office. I've never killed a man." Again my expression changed and again he did not notice it. I went on. "I've done some fighting, but I've never had a chance to kill anyone. When we were hand-to-hand

with the Japanese one of our battalion got the Victoria Cross and quite a few were cited for gallantry when they lost an arm or a leg. But that wasn't my luck. There isn't a scar on my body from the war. That skin disease, a primitive girl . . ."

I changed the subject. "After getting back from Death Valley I still had troubles to bear. Sometimes I want to do some writing, but I can't. Simply to suffer in life doesn't make life meaningful, Shiva Raj. All lives are meaningless. This life I'm leading now isn't a reaction to my suffering. We suffer until we die."

With a laugh I went on. "I didn't go to war to get something by giving up something else. I didn't get a thing, but I certainly lost something. I didn't even give it up knowingly; it went by itself. What could I do? In other words, I came back emptied. Do you understand why I'm not bored with life? I came back to spend the rest of my life in my own way, spending each day as it comes. I came back empty." The expression on my face had gradually changed but I could no longer control it. I let it go and continued, "But I don't want to run away from life."

He interrupted me to ask, "But aren't you running away with your bottles and glasses?"

"This isn't running away," I said. "In the war there was always rum to drink and this is just a habit I can't get away from. You all think that you can have a good time in the army. But there the 'good time' is only folk songs and rum. There isn't anything else. Oh, the top officers have a lot of fun.

All night they drink whiskey in the canteen and dance. But there is no one to provide for the poor soldiers. Especially our soldiers who, in the name of their ancestors, have to wield their khukuries and jump around. It would be better not to be reminded of home, but that can't be . . . I don't feel like talking about war, Shiva Raj. War means cutting up men who are just like us, that's all it is."

He was disappointed. "You can say 'that's all it is' after you've done the cutting up."

"Believe me, I've never killed anyone. No doubt others have. Many, probably because it was their duty to cut, went on beheading enemies already killed by bombs. They went on slicing at trees and branches, more than you can count. But why should we waste our time talking about war?"

With growing eagerness he asked, "Why do you always try to evade me when we get on this subject? Don't you know how curious we are about it?"

After I had divided what was left in the bottle between us, I said, "I've already said that there's nothing special in the history of my connection with the war. I led a very ordinary life. . . Before a man goes to war he should turn himself into a machine, he shouldn't love anyone. That's all."

He emptied his glass and laughed. "Even I know that much. Don't take me for such a child."

"According to what the soldiers say," I went on, becoming rather serious, "a man with a sweetheart thinks of her all the time and a man with a wife thinks of his wife. American and British soldiers go to sleep hugging their pillows. Our boys are

satisfied with looking at the faded snapshots of their sweethearts. Everyone has a copy of 'Prem Lahari' in his bag. They pass around copies of 'Akbar Birbal', 'Tota Maina' and 'Koka Shastra'. Do you see how war turns men into goats? British soldiers can't look at a woman without getting excited. . . But I didn't have a sweetheart."

My fingers squeezed the glass. If it had been made of silver it would have crumpled. But being glass it held its shape.

He was still unsatisfied. "This is just everyday war talk, the typical mentality of soldiers. If you wanted to you could talk about your own philosophy of war or your first-hand contacts with the enemy."

I was embarrassed because he did not value what I said. Still, hiding my embarrassment, I said, "It may seem everyday to you, but it has its importance. Anyway, what kind of talk do you expect from a soldier, Shiva Raj. Soldiers are always vulgar. Come on, let's eat."

He saw very clearly that I was hiding something. We went to the kitchen. We ate and came back without talking about anything special. He puffed on his cigarette for awhile and then, glancing at his watch, he started. "Now I've done it! I've got to go. Bari won't be asleep, If she finds out about this, she'll explode."

"And Mujura?" The words slipped out unintentionally. Feeling awkward, I looked down for a moment.

In a normal voice he said, "She's asleep by

now. Bari doesn't get to sleep until close to midnight. Besides, it's not Mujura's nature to oppose anyone. She doesn't complain if I drink. But Bari doesn't care what people think; she gets angry. And that makes me care for her even more."

Why? The question flashed through my mind and as quickly vanished. It made me happy to hear that Mujura was docile.

After that, I couldn't keep him from going. I walked him as far as the gate and came back. The room, a meeting-place for drunkards, was a mess. I didn't care. As I went to my bed, I noticed a piece of paper that had fallen under Shiva Raj's chair. Out of curiosity I picked it up and looked at it. It was a snapshot, fallen face down, with "Sakambari" written very clearly on the back. That's just the way drunkards are. They don't notice where or what they drop. Shiva Raj must have dropped it there. If he had left it in someone else's room or in a bar, what a fool he would have made of himself! Here there was no harm. I did not have the nerve to turn the picture over and look at it. I did not have to look at it. I had already seen Sakambari. I put it carefully in my coat pocket. I would go and return it tomorrow.

It was past ten. Sitting by the window I began to think over the things Shiva Raj and I had talked about. I had no other work and no problems to wrestle with. An empty man, when I put my head on the pillow, there was no need to say anything until morning. There was nothing that I had to think about. In a sense, my life flowed smoothly, without obstacles. I had found relief.

"The girls of this house are remarkable." With this thought I reached the front yard. Since the first visit two weeks had passed, a long wait I would say. But this time I felt no special interest in coming. I was not of an age to feel or show interest, this I knew very well. I had to return an unlooked-at picture to Shiva Raj. That was all.

The atmosphere of the house was the same. The car was there. On that one patch of lawn there were blue flowers now slightly faded. Only Mujura's legs were not in sight. Perhaps I was looking for something when suddenly, in the tender sunlight beyond the bushes which grew almost shoulder-high, I saw Sakambari lifting her shorn, golden-brown head to see something on the wall. Seeing a thin line of smoke glisten in the sunlight and vanish, I realized that she was puffing on a cigarette. Suspended above the bushes a golden-brown head, a wisp of smoke and, a little above them, clinging to the wall, the blossoms of some plant, perhaps the orchid – to the eye focused on that scene it presented a fascinating

piece of art.

But I did not look at that scene for long. It was a little embarrassing to come alone upon someone from behind. It was difficult to call her name; to cough would have been rather rude. But she did not keep me in that predicament for long. Attentive like a quiet cat that turns its head as soon as it senses someone coming, she glanced around. Above her very low-cut blouse her chest was visible. The sight of her collar-bone and her very full breasts excited laughter and desire at the same time. That is all I looked at; that is all I saw.

She was not the kind of woman who immediately feels helpless. I had known that from the first. Without feeling any hesitation, she said with ease, "You've probably come to see my brother. He's gone out. Please wait a while."

"When will he be back?"

"He should be back very soon."

She strode from behind the bushes into full view. The butt of a cigarette was held upright between her slender fingers. Taking a last puff, she tossed it on the ground. I was standing with my hands in my pants pockets, staring at the ground. I did not find it necessary to talk to her.

After a moment she broke the silence. "You rent a place in town, don't you? Shiva told me."

What a bold woman she must be to call her brother Shiva. When I paid no attention to her words, she spoke again. "Didn't you hear me?"

Then, pretending to be surprised, I said, "No. I was just wondering where these orchids that are

hanging on the wall come from. I haven't seen them anywhere else around here."

Her face brightened in the light of the sun. She said, "Flowers are my hobby." This must have been the limit of her ability to smile or be happy. "These flowers have been brought from a special place. They have a special characteristic. Look here. On these stems something like buds are sprouting. Do you see? They are the most important organs of the flower. With them they kill insects That's why they call this the life-killing orchid. Bumblebees, black-bees, hornets must not come near."

Out of curiosity I went over and stood beside her. A thin invisible wall of air was all that separated us. With obvious pleasure she went on talking, her thin fingers moving near the flowers. "When they are aware of the sound of the bumblebee or black-bee or hornet, these pouches that look like buds open their mouths. I don't know what there is in them, but the insects leave the flowers and enter them. When a bee has entered the pouch it closes its mouth. Inside, the insect dies of suffocation. It is very interesting. There's no insect here now or else you could see for yourself, Suyogji."

I looked at her with surprise, but she was not looking at me. I thought to myself, this woman is really bold. But what did her boldness have to do with me? Looking at her face I felt strangely chilled. Why did she take such pleasure in the fact that these orchids kill insects? Now, talking to her was not merely a formality. I wanted to talk to her. I took a pack of cigarettes from my pocket and offered

her one; without hesitation she took it.

After lighting it I asked, "If the bees can't settle here, what's the use of this flower?" Then I felt embarrassed at having asked such a commonplace question, just like a soldier.

But she didn't treat it as commonplace. Blowing the cigarette smoke from her mouth, she said, "The flower won't be spoiled; it is secure."

I was growing more interested in her. Without looking at her, I said, "If that's so, why should it bloom without any purpose? A flower must have some kind of purpose. If that flower has the power to kill without having some special blossoms or treasure to yield, then what's the meaning of its special characteristic? Since a flower has to fade and fall, why can't it die fighting an assailant?" I searched her face to see what impression my words had made, but there was no change. She was still not looking at me.

But then removing her gaze from the flowers and looking at me, she said, "How quickly you've moved from flowers to a worn-out philosophy of life!" I frowned, but she went on. "If a flower buds for itself and opens for itself and, as if accepting some compulsion, falls whether it fights the black-bee or not, then why should it fall suffering the sting of the black-bee? It falls only for itself. It falls by its own will."

How absurd was her impression of life, and how cruel. She was no more than an arm's length away from me. But my belief that only a thin barrier of air kept me from touching her was shaken.

Shiva Raj had not come. My interest was not satisfied. I said, "Are you still talking about flowers?"

"Yes, for these who think of the flower as life."

My face was beginning to reflect my disturbed emotions. Ignoring everything else, I saw only the rise and fall of her breasts on her thin body as she breathed, I felt pleasure. But it wasn't right for me to feel that way or to show my feeling. I said, "That struggle with the black-bee, it's not really a struggle at all."

She interrupted me. "Please be direct. It is love, that's all, love. And there's no inevitability about love either. Or about suffering in love. It is possible to live out one's life alone . . . alone."

"How does your flower teach that lesson? Doesn't it teach you to live alone and kill whatever touches you?"

In that voice as sharp as a bullet she said, "Yes, that's what the flower says. But if someone comes to be killed, I've nothing to say about that. It's getting warm. Let's go inside."

Following a golden-brown head poised on an erect body, I went for the second time through the front door of that house and up to the same living-room. She waited till I got there and then went out. Alone, I began to think of what an absurd woman she was. There must be man-hating blood flowing through her veins. But no, she cares for her brother and for that reason, Shiva Raj cares for her more than the others. Is Sakambari's life empty, loveless? But if it is, what difference does it make to me? Here I am, forty-five years old and what woman have I

ever loved? Now that I am really old, what interest do I have in love or woman? What use?

A few minutes later she shouted from the door. "You probably don't care very much about flowers." In her hand was a fresh cigarette. "A soldier and flowers – how incompatible!" Her face brightened to the limit of her laugh and she went out abruptly.

I knew that she was laughing at me. She had spoken the word 'soldier' so bluntly. Shiva Raj must have told her everything I said — a great friend! On that first day I had known that thinking about this woman required a separate room, complete solitude. They were essential. But, what's the difference? Her idea isn't applicable to women. It isn't even applicable to to her. A woman is a woman and a flower is a flower. I'm an old soldier and I . . . I don' t care very much about flowers. But a woman . . . My head began to ache. I tried to forget myself by playing with the fresh blue flowers filling the vase. Yet here also was a woman. But Mujura was more womanly, a good woman. Just then I heard Shiva Raj calling Bari's name from the ground floor. I felt relieved.

As soon as he saw me he said, "Bari just told me downstairs. Don't trouble yourself, consider this your own home."

Taking from my pocket a woman's picture that I had not looked at, I said, "You left this picture at my place yesterday. I've come to give it back. Here."

Startled, he said, "How careless! What if I had left it somewhere else?" He looked at the picture with a lover's eyes and then slipped it into the front of his wallet. Out of my pocket escaped a problem, a

cynic, an impudence.

From outside came such a racket that the two of us could not concentrate. He was probably used to it but to me it was unusual. "Can't you speak a little softer, Bari?" That was the voice of someone old. "Why do you have to smoke so much?" Then a high gentle voice spoke. "Sister Bari, sing us a song that the Lahure soldiers sing." There was a burst of bold laughter. To conceal what was going on I asked my friend, "You always keep fresh flowers here, don't you Shiva Raj?" I had no special reason for asking.

Smiling, he answered, "Bari always fills the vase. Mujura isn't interested in such things. And I never see my little sister. When I get up in the morning she's already gone off to class and when I get home at night she's eaten and gone to sleep."

He would have continued but Bari came scolding into the room. "Shiva, don't you feel like eating today? Why don't you eat here too, Suyogji?"

I was embarrassed. "No, I'm going to eat at home."

"Who cooks for you at home? Probably a cook. Is he any good? Now that you're old, you should get married."

For a moment Bari's words made me feel miserable. I thought, she just says whatever comes into her head. She doesn't care how much she embarrasses someone. She's really an outspoken woman. How easily she calls me first 'soldier' and then 'old man'. I think she even embarrasses her brother a bit.

Saying good-bye, I hurried toward home. On

the way I suffered from my wound. I am old. Not only am I old, I look old. That was the truth, the unavoidable truth. Growing old was inevitable. What could I do? Was I eager to look young to get something from life? What do I have now? I am an empty urn. I am an absurdity. I tried to find some consolation for myself, but I could not. All day I felt unhappy.

Many days passed. I gave up going to the bar. And Shiva Raj did not come to my place. I did not dare go to that house a third time. Bari did not know how to speak properly. Why should I go there where there was no respect or courtesy or affection? If she behaved that way at our second meeting, what would she be like at a third or fourth? Who knows what she might say, how much she might embarrass me? Even if nothing happened, it would still be degrading for me.

In the evening I often contented myself with looking from my window at the busy stall across the way. I had nothing else to do. I looked at the stall and I thought. Often the stall-keeper would go somewhere for an hour or two in search of the congenial evening atmosphere. And every evening after he left, his wife and a sixteen-year old boy who sold soda-water would begin their love story. There the story was written. There, reaching the limit of that inexpressible and allegedly limitless pleasure, it was erased.

The stall-keeper's wife is sincere in her love for the boy; his love for her is deep, though who knows from what greed or for what reason. This too is life; this too is love.

I have heard that in both the stall-keeper's wife's lungs large cavities of tuberculosis have formed. My cook hates to buy groceries there. He says that she has two years at the most to live. How ignorant she is about herself, and at the same time, how happy she is. She too should develop a life-killing organ — but no, she already has one. Will she not die giving the boy all the germs of her chest as a love-token? There is no doubt of it.

This then is human love; it can exist anywhere. Absurd love and absurd lives always go hand in hand. As long as she draws breath in her hollow lungs the stall-keeper's wife will go on loving the boy, perhaps quenching some thirst of the flesh, and the boy, as long as he finds the atmosphere easy, will love her – to quench who knows what kind of thirst? To embrace the stall-keeper's wife within the darkening stall — that is the limit of the boy's love. Then what is the meaning of that love? What is the value of that love?

From these thoughts my mind began to wander. . . . I am a man without hope. I have never loved anyone, though I have touched women. Gradually my expression became distorted. To divert myself I remembered again that house hidden within the forest of mimosas. . . . Yes, I have become an old man. I do not feel the passion of that young boy; it is not for me to explore the worth of love.

Now, no doubt, those blue mimosa flowers are fading too. As their season with the tree comes to an end, they have to give up their attachment. They are beginning to fall, each by its own will . . . What a difference there is between Sakambari and the stall-keeper's wife; how opposite they are! What after all, is Sakambari? Compared to her, the stall-keeper's wife is better.

Startled by the sound of a bicycle-bell ringing in the street, I saw that Shiva Raj had come. In a way I was pleased. He walked in complaining, "Where have you been keeping yourself? I have very little leisure, but what work do you have? It's as if you've forgotten me."

I did not know why Shiva Raj wanted to be so intimate with me. I suspected that it had to do with the three younger sisters he had to marry. But that was a ridiculous suspicion. In those buxom, virgin sisters what defect could there be ?

Looking pleased, I said, "I've been a bit unwell. Otherwise I would have come."

He was not convinced. Looking at me he did not believe that I had been ill. He said, "But you don't look any thinner. Have you given up alcohol or something?"

"How can I give it up? it's available everywhere. This is the age of alcohol. Where can you go to get away from it?"

Shiva Raj did not have much leisure for talking. He wanted to extract the essence of many days at one time. He sent for full bottles and emptied them. We touched on everything. Then, the stall-

keeper's wife, the boy who sold soda-water, absurd love, Sakambari— all were forgotten. I gave myself completely to the influence of alcohol.

But when it was time to go, Shiva Raj stripped the covering from reality by saying, "The day after tomorrow is Bari's birthday. You're invited. Please don't bring anything like a present when you come. Bari doesn't accept that sort of thing. She'd be likely to throw it back in your face."

I really felt then as if it had been thrown in my face. Looking down, I said, "I'll try."

"There's nothing to try. I'll come and pick you up here."

He went off in a hurry. I stood there dumbfounded like a passenger who has been passed up by a bus. I thought, if he says he'll come, he'll come; Shiva Raj is very determined. But how can I go? The old man has come all dressed up, she will probably say, or something like that. Sakambari has that kind of mouth. And how can I be so inept as to go on such a festive day without a present? I've always been careful about such things. I'm sure she knows that. Oh! this should have been Mujura's birthday. Then I could go with some dignity. But Mujura would not even appear in the living-room. I've got to find some way to get out of going.

I had to escape. I was sure of that.

I have celebrated countless birthdays, but on this birthday, I honestly admit, something was wrong with me. That is, I was forced into an awkward position. Under the pretext of some special work I went out alone in the afternoon to wander aimlessly. Though I had wandered this way before, I was doing it now especially to avoid someone. I thought, what a coward I am! What has made me such a coward? Have I always been a coward? I'm a veteran of the Second World War: I've fought among bayonets and bullets. Pah! I was ashamed to think of these things again.

Beside Bhugol Park I heard a familiar voice calling me, "Where are you going? Didn't I tell you about tonight?"

I cannot remember clearly the discussion that followed. But finally I went meekly along with him until I found myself at the front door of that house isolated within the clusters of mimosa. There was no one there. Perhaps I was the only guest. Or else they were in Bari's room. Maybe her friends had

finished eating and left, and I was the last guest. Shiva Raj's living-room was as well-furnished and as silent as before. What I had hoped for was not so.

Leaving me in the living-room, he went inside. I went to the window as if to look out. That day I felt different. I was wary of something, but I did not know what or why. If I had begun to look old, how or where could I hide myself, especially from Sakambari's eyes? I wanted to hide, but where can you conceal a bitter truth? Can it ever really be hidden? But wasn't I hiding some truth within me? I felt something pressing like a weight on my brain. With a nervous gesture I pulled the jasmine from the buttonhole of my expensive jacket and threw it out the window.

"Oh!" There at the door was Bari, her brown hair soft and light from shampooing. On her small face her small eyes were twinkling, probably in laughter. I thought, a cat is quick to see everything. Oh well! That meant my downfall. This was not going to be my good day either. The interest I felt in talking to her the second time we met was dead. From the moment she walked in I was tense. What was she going to say?

Crossing to the table she said, "Suyogji, today I am twenty-four."

I knew that very well, but I did not say so. I only congratulated her. I felt annoyed by her, by every aspect of her behavior. She asked me to sit on the couch. Picking up a package of cigarettes, she came over, opened it and offered me one. Lighting a match, she bent her head toward me, very

close. We were the distance of a single cigarette and a burning match from each other. My nerves were beginning to feel soothed by the light fragrance of shampoo and cardamom. But then, like a dream torn from sleep, she went away and I could not recapture that feeling. But gradually my annoyance at her disappeared and I felt interested in her again, an ordinary interest.

Turning her back toward me she stood there in her green cotton sari, five feet three inches tall, with her golden-brown head stuck on a body like a bamboo pole. For a while she didn't say anything . . . I am a young man of five feet six inches — no, not a young man, an old man. She is three inches shorter than me and twenty-one years younger. With this thought, I stopped short, twenty-one miles from the reality of Shiva Raj's living-room. What was the use of such comparisons? I began to feel sad. What an absurd feeling, I thought. She stood there silent and unseeing for a while and then, with a cry, she went to the chest of drawers across from Shiva Raj's cot. "Oh! I forgot! Shiva sent me to get something, something that you can't get along without." Holding their necks in her slim fingers, she pulled out two bottles of Aristocrat Brandy.

She always made me feel worthless and now she had added something else. What did it matter? I could not deny that it was a habit. That would be impossible for me. With honesty I accepted what she had said. She took the bottles and went out. As she went she said in her harsh voice, "Shiva's a drunkard and Shiva's friend's a drunkard."

I am an old man, a soldier, a drunkard. Laid out in a row before me those biting epithets mocked my name bitterly. Suyog Bir Singh, old man, drunkard, soldier — this was my reward for making the naked khukuri dance in the air. I must preserve this reward for my heroism, for the experiences I went through in the Second World War; this gift for the empty life I returned to when I crawled out of Death Valley.

Bari came back, carrying a tray with glasses and snacks. Then Shiva Raj came in. My evenings always repeated themselves. They had become a routine with me. Now I felt good again. Sakambari stood at the side of the couch lighting a cigarette. Opening a bottle, Shiva Raj said, "Long live Bari! May her birthdays come often."

"May Bari grow old! That is Shiva's wish," cried Bari.

I felt her mockery.

Shiva objected. "That doesn't mean 'grow old'; it means 'live for many years'."

She picked up his point. "What's the use of living? Why live to be old? Shiva, you don't know how to bless; You should say, 'Die in time.' What is there that's really worth living for?"

I saw that Bari was not joking. She looked very serious. I felt like asking, why are you so interested in death, but I did not say anything. If she was a hater of humanity, then I . . . I was a lifeless coward who did not have the ability to love a woman. How well-matched we were! In order to keep my composure I asked rather cautiously, "Would

it be all right if I call you Bari from now on?"

Shiva Raj was happy. "Oh yes, please do. And say 'thou' to them, not 'you'. After all, they're just like your own sisters."

I found no special significance in Shiva's remark. There was no change in Bari. It was difficult to see the look in her eyes behind the glasses sparkling from the electric light. Most women are pleased and happy to be called by their pet name, but Bari did not look as if she were. Casually, she said, "You may call me whatever you like."

Then our talk took its usual course. But I was tense and fearful as we spoke, afraid that a bullet might explode at my side. In the course of our talk, Shiva Raj turned to Bari, "You see, Bari, how desperate Suyogji gets when the talk turns to war? You see how he eludes us?"

Blowing the smoke from her mouth, Bari said, "Maybe he's afraid."

Shiva Raj was surprised. "What is a soldier afraid of?"

Bari answered, "War is a crime, Shiva. The war we fight in someone's name, under someone's orders, is a crime committed by one individual against another. Every killer ought to write his crime on his forehead. It isn't always apparent on the surface."

In all the years since I returned from the war, no one had judged me that way. I did not know what Bari's intention was. But what did Bari know? In the name of heroism we die, we sacrifice and are sacrificed. What kind of crime is that?

Bari went to the window. "You're a criminal too."

I felt just like a man at the moment when, all alone in the silence of night, he is awakened by the cry of a strange voice. Something jolted through my brain like an electric current. My heart pounded.

Shiva Raj thought for a moment and said, "But Bari, he's never killed anyone."

"Is killing someone the only crime?" Bari left the window and moved closer. I was deeply shaken. Draining my glass of whiskey I thought, Bari knows nothing. She is completely immature; she has not grown up. But I did not understand Bari's intention.

Leaving my side she went out, her expression just as neutral as before. After her light brown head disappeared from sight I gradually began to breathe more easily again. That evening Shiva poured me as much whiskey as I could drink. For her birthday Bari feasted us with flawless curries and other dishes prepared by experienced hands. After eleven I said goodbye. Shiva asked me to sleep there but I was not in the mood.

The monotonous whirring of my bicycle cut through the pitch black night. Overheated from the sweltering humidity and the whiskey, I reached the city. Satisfied and drowsy I fell asleep.

Getting up in the morning I felt thirsty, maybe because of the night before, but I was not sure. As always, my empty mind was empty still.

A long time went by. The rainy season, in its last days, was trying to drench Kathmandu Valley. During that time, my forty-fifth year fled, shoving me into my forty-sixth. I spent, or rather, I celebrated the day by trying as hard as I could to deceive myself.

I went to the bar as usual and met Shiva Raj as usual. There was no change in our routine. Nevertheless, there was an increase of new material in this chapter of my solitary life. I had become very familiar at Shiva Raj's house. They were all the same as before. Shiva Raj passed his time in the same meaningless way-work by day and a little pleasure by night. Though his mother had often asked him to bring home a bride and satisfy her desire for a daughter-in-law, Shiva Raj had evaded her under some pretense or another. Why? There was no problem of his being able to keep a wife. But up to now he had not chosen anyone. If he had, he could have won her. Shiva Raj was much handsomer than I and there was no reason he could not find a bride.

I often went there. Sakambari's life was just the same. Calling her Bari and addressing her as 'thou' I felt very close to her. I had become accustomed to Bari's nature. Usually I found her as hard and cruel as ever. She was young, a blossoming woman, but it always seemed as if she were unconscious of it. Whenever I went there I found her at home. It seemed as if she had no interest in outside amusement. She smoked continuously. Sometimes I thought this was all she had seized upon in the name of luxury in her life. And sometimes I thought Bari was hiding some mystery in the clouds of smoke or that she must want to mingle with the smoke and escape. But these were only guesses. They had no troubles at home. Besides, Bari had complete influence over her brother and therefore, it seemed to me, she was free from problems and discontent.

Very often when she was lighting my cigarette, giving or showing me something, she came very close to me. So close that I felt her warm breath on my face. But her expression never changed. She showed no reaction to me. She was always the same, always neutral. I thought maybe she was not sexually aware, or maybe she had recognized the smell of old age. But her feeling was not altogether hatred.

But I was not so old as all that. In fact my body still looked rather young. If I kept my health I could deceive others, if not myself, until I was fifty. But so what? Our being man and woman was not enough to create something; so many other things had to match. Even if I were not an old man, I was not the age to be intimate with Bari. Shiva was only

thirty or so and his familiar talk suited her. How could mine suit her? Shiva once told me that he trusted Bari very much, more than he trusted himself. It was possible. It is not difficult to confide in a girl who keeps to herself.

I also saw a lot of Mujura. Not only saw her, but talked to her. She was lovely, especially her eyes. Her talk and behavior were well-mannered. She would not look me straight in the eye, nor would she come close to me. If something indelicate came up in our talk, she would redden to the tips of her ears. In her nature there was no such thing as scorn. Her words spoke clearly of her affection for everything. Whenever I saw Mujura, even from a distance, I felt a kind of hidden thirst for her. Love does not grow only from touch and smell. It grows in other ways too. But I was not ready to admit such thoughts. Love was absurd, it was futile for me.

Whenever I listened to Mujura's candid and guileless talk I pictured clearly behind her a home, a world, affection, the existence of many living things. And my own life seemed very drab to me. I felt like saying to her: Mujura, give me some alms of life too, some fragment of happiness.

And so I went on exploring the many meanings of Mujura. Often under the spell of whiskey I tried to hint to Shiva Raj what I was thinking: give Mujura to me in marriage and I will make her happy. I will build a world for her. But I never dared to say so much. If I had, Shiva Raj would not have rejected me. It was my bad luck that I could not say it.

Matters had gone far. I also spoke openly to

Shiva Raj's youngest sister, who was called Sanu at home. I did not meet her often in the house. She was always going one place or another with her friends. She always wrapped her well-shaped body according to the latest fashion. Whenever I saw her from behind, I watched her as long as I could. When I met her somewhere I would ask, "Where have you been, Sanu?" and when I found her at home I would only say, "Aren't you going out today, Sanu?"

Up till then I had not been in their own rooms. When Sanu was not out somewhere she spent her time reading. Shiva told me that Bari read a lot, but I rarely found her with a book. Instead I always found her with a cigarette in her hand. Sometimes I teased her, "You'll get cancer this way, Bari," and she always answered, "It will be welcome."

On the whole they were all good people. They were neither sophisticated nor common. Mujura and Sanu both called me 'brother Suyog' but Bari could never get her fill of calling me 'Suyogji'. She would have called her father by name if she could. It was not impossible. They often teased me about getting married. I even got used to their teasing in a way. Once when I asked Mujura to find a girl for me because I could not, she laughed and said I ought to be ashamed to say I could not find a girl, because anyone could find one. Poor thing, what did she know? A girl, marriage—how ironical these words were for me. I wanted to say, if I were able to love, if I were able to summon life's freshness into my room by setting up a wife, Mujura, I would have asked Shiva Raj to give you to me and he would have agreed.

Sometimes when we talked this way I felt at odds with myself. When everything seemed unpleasant I sat and smoked with Bari and pretended to forget. It seemed to me as if Bari saw right to the point when I was in that condition, but she said nothing. Though her eyes were alert behind her glasses like those of a cat at play, she was really not the type to scratch in a direct attack.

My intimacy with the house, growing with the fresh blue mimosa blossoms, went this far, only this far. And now slowly the leaves had begun to leave the branches naked.

It was a morning in autumn. Dasain was not far off. I was alone in Shiva Raj's living-room, waiting for Shiva. I had gone upstairs to wait, probably without anyone knowing. Certainly not Bari, for when I looked out of the window I saw her lying flat on her back on the green grass. I did not know what she was doing. Like a snake who has come out to bask in the morning sun, she was lying stretched full-length in an easy, unrestrained position. Seeing her that way, looking so much like a snake, I shivered, though between us was the distance from the room where I was looking to the spot where she was lying. I did not try to move away or to look away. Let us say I was unable to. I thought, if she sees me she will probably call me a crude, ill-mannered soldier. And what will Shiva Raj say if he comes back? But these were only thoughts. I felt willing to endure anything. Why should I deprive myself by giving up this trivial scene? Didn't I have a right to such a little thing? What did I have in life? What crime was it that I could not keep myself from a simple pleasure like a

glimpse? What sin was it?

Bari went away, but I could not leave the window. I stood there thinking. Without suffering any opposition or argument I had seen many naked women from very close at hand. But that was not the situation with Bari. I watched her because that pose was so becoming to her. No. I always watched her. I watched her because I liked to. But why should a man deceive himself? I compared looking at Bari in that unrestrained position and looking as I had at so many naked women, and though I tried and needed to find similarities, there were none. I had to admit I had done something wrong. What would have happened if I had seen Bari naked today? To that question I put an emphatic period.

Composing myself, I went away from the window. After a while the tapping of sandals and the smell of cigarette smoke entered the living-room. Man is by nature a master of hypocrisy. So, as if I knew nothing, I acted surprised to see Bari. The poor girl looked at me and said, with a brightening face, "When did you come, Suyogji? I'm just on my way to the temple with my mother."

I asked her, "Do you believe in god and worship, Bari?"

"I do and I don't." She sat down on the couch nearby.

"Why?" I asked her in surprise.

"It's only a stone. You can commit any crime in front of it and it won't tell anyone. That's why I do believe. And in time of need you can shake it by the shoulders and it won't say anything. That's why

I don't believe. What reason is there to have any more faith or lack of faith than that in a stone?"

Once again I could not understand Bari's intention, but forcing a laugh I said, "How easily you've solved such a difficult problem. Is that the extent of god's existence?"

She immediately retorted, "Don't say 'god', say 'the idea of god'. It's only a concept." As she put out her cigarette in the ashtray, I looked at her as if she also were only a concept, a pure undeveloped concept. To say, this is a human being, the medium of thought would be sufficient.

Suddenly I said, "If that's so, then you should not be called 'Bari' but 'the idea of Bari'."

"But why do you doubt my existence? Say 'Bari'. My whole existence can be seen and touched."

She was lighting another cigarette. Looking at the smoke and the cigerette burning as always between her slender nicotine-stained fingers, I began for some reason to feel annoyed. I tried to cover my annoyance by making a feeble joke. "Bari, you ought to teach your idea of god to smoke too. Perhaps it has also become weary of living in the world of men."

She might have been laughing. Her face brightened, "Then let it get cancer and quickly die."

I wanted to tell her, your face brightens this way at every mention of death and mortality, but instead I said, "If I asked you not to smoke, would you be unhappy, Bari?"

In a hard voice she snapped, "Yes."

"If I asked you now to stop smoking, what would you do, Bari?"

"I'd smoke ten with pleasure."

I felt deeply wounded. I thought, what a really hard woman she is! She does not care how much she hurts others. To ask her to give up smoking was only to humiliate oneself. I dropped that subject and said, "After your god has died of cancer, what will be the condition of your world?"

"It will go on just the same. If mankind died, that would be another story." She went toward the chest of drawers.

From all this I gathered Bari's feelings about god. I thought, she is indifferent about the existence of god. At the same time she does not have a very good opinion of man either. Then by what faith is Bari living? She was looking for something in the drawer. That neck that can be encircled by one hand and that small head covered with soft brown hair, do they hang there meaninglessly in space? For no reason? It was some consolation to know that Shiva Raj did not think of her that way. She moved away without looking at me.

On the strength of some inspiration I asked, "Bari, you don't care about god, but where can those unfortunate people who want to be whole go, to cleanse themselves of pain and guilt? If it were you, what would you do, Bari?" I had not intended to ask that question. Maybe it came from my subconscious mind. I would never have asked it consciously. It seemed as if I had asked it for nothing. But then, turning her head, she looked at me with sardonic, mocking eyes. I had no choice but to bear the consequences.

"After committing a crime I wouldn't try to

wash it away like that, Suyogji. To wash away a crime—how laughable that is!"

Looking discouraged I asked, "In that case, how can we, as men, be reconciled with one another?"

She said, "Washing away one's sins before the idea of god is completely meaningless. It's just foolishness . . . But please don't give my ideas such importance . . . It is better to wash away one's crimes before men. One can lighten them a little and find peace. Man has the power of understanding, that's all."

I felt like taking hold of her and asking, is it really you saying this, Bari? But spurning my train of thought she asked, "What is it, Suyogji? You act as if you've got something bothering you inside. Who can trust a soldier?"

I felt a chill through my whole body. This was the cold talk of a cold person. I did not feel the need to say anything more.

"Is a soldier nothing but the symbol of distrust?" With these words I took leave of Bari. I did not have to ask her for sympathy.

In the countless times I had been defeated by Bari in such talk, it was at least a satisfaction that she never preached or pitied me. And even though I always suffered defeat, for some reason I wanted to listen to her talk. It was like getting one's hand bloodied to pluck a rose from among the thorns or to pick a fresh wild berry on a thorny slope and toss it in one's mouth. As uncomfortable as she made me I wanted to follow Bari, without aim or reason.

But this was not the limit of my interest in her. Sometimes it was her slender neck that attrac-

ted me, her head with its closely cropped brown hair or her unusually full breasts. But I was not ready to say that this attraction was anything more than what a man feels when he looks at a woman. That is why I had run away today, putting a period to my thoughts as soon as I began to wonder about seeing Bari naked. How great I was that when these eyes that have looked at naked women accidentally fell today on Bari fully dressed, I could struggle with the definition of sin! No doubt I was great.

But I did not intend to pick up Bari at the age of forty-six to make my life sour. Having grown up accustomed to meaninglessness I was afraid of life. What is Sakambari? What is there in her? I would dismiss her in this way, consoling myself with an empty consolation.

I had no faith in setting up a wife. Whenever marriage talk came up anywhere, vivid thoughts of Mujura came to mind and I thought, perhaps this is what a wife should be like. If Shiva Raj had said, choose one of my sisters, I would have decorated my room with Mujura and written "my wife" on her forehead. Though in all frankness, my thoughts of Mujura were baseless and without meaning. They were without meaning. Sitting and thinking in the living room, I gave them up. Baseless and without meaning I thought, Mujura is a lovely story that makes the heart overflow. She is a delightful view that satisfies the eyes. But I could say on oath that I was not in love with Mujura. I do not know if it is necessary to love a wife. What a lie love is, what a joke, what futility!

The stall-keeper's wife had vomited a panful of blood and was very weak. There was a brief pause in her love story. The boy stood leaning against the lamp-post, his mood blank like cement, his hands and mind empty. An emaciated street dog who had given up chasing a bitch and come back lay at the boy's feet feeling the same solace and the same pain. Both looked ragged. Both looked tired. Night took its customary walk down the path painted in the smoky color of evening. It had nothing to say to their empty minds and empty hands.

Sitting at the window across the way, letting evening slip from my hands, I had been watching and thinking how similar my existence was to the defeated dog's and the defeated lover's. What separates us from each other? I run to the fashionable bars; the boy goes to the tavern and the dog – the dog raises his throat and expresses himself with a howl. How similar our existences are! In this layer of time, life has come to a standstill, but we still go on passing our lives. We have become motionless but our motions

do not stop.

Pretending to live, with meaning gone, I too headed toward my goal. Having gotten used to drinking big jars of beer and whiskey in the villages of Chin and Kachin, I could not steep my nerves in the meagre shot-glasses. That is why drinking did not mean escape for me. I could not lose myself in whiskey. This, I had to admit, was not my vice, my weakness.

Shiva Raj had not come. Perhaps he would not come. I sat there thinking. The young waiter filled the unspoken orders of the familiar drunk. Our impressions of life were reflected in the expression on his face. He seemed to be a living illustration, of addiction, failure, discontent, boredom, rebellion and escape. Perhaps with his whiskey tips he flies from this confinement to the warm embrace of some sweetheart or lays down his earnings beside the ragged mat of his poor mother.

As I was thinking about this, Shiva Raj arrived, his face a bit troubled. "Suyogji, I can't get Panama cigarettes in the bazaar. I've just ordered a carton in the black market and I've got to pick it up." Behind the carton of cigarettes I pictured a golden-brown head and so I did not give much importance to what he was saying. He went on, "Bari is leaving tomorrow for a month's stay in the Terai."

After that he had more to say, but I only saw his lips moving. Something happened. I cannot say exactly what, but something happened that had never happened before in my life – a new experience. "Bari won't be here after tomorrow." That was enough to

make me feel as if I were flung by a forceful blow onto a vast plain of reality, where dreams, fantasies, hypocrisy, did not exist, only reality. I felt like an empty vessel, like a bottle from which the liquid is escaping, unable to collect it again. Like a tree standing alone in the earth, paralyzed, unable to follow the cranes flying from its branches. How terribly lonely naked reality is when you have nothing inside to hide it or cover it with.

"Suyogji, you're sitting there in a daze. Aren't you talking?" Shiva Raj's words startled me. With a weak laugh I looked at Shiva Raj, whose lips were just like Bari's. I tried as hard as I could to cover my inner nakedness. He was saying, "I couldn't get a plane ticket so I got her a bus ticket." I was relieved that Shiva Raj could not guess my feelings. He was not perceptive in that way.

Trying to free myself from the situation I said, "Can't she get cigarettes there?"

Though the question was not quite relevant, Shiva Raj said, "Maybe, but she'll have a hard time if she can't."

He did not tell me why Bari was going. After a short time, he left the bar. Since I was the last customer in the bar I also left, feeling homeless. For the first time in my forty-six untroubled years I was feeling miserable over a woman.

Gradually the night grew cold and the wind blew harder. Dragging myself through the empty streets I came to Ratna Park. I started thinking of how many women my heart had welcomed and how many it had dismissed, of how many women I had

held in my arms only to send them away again. But I had never felt empty and alone because of a woman's absence. I would not be able to see Bari at her house for a month. Wasn't that the whole problem? Then why was I so upset? What attraction bound me to Bari? What did I want from Bari? Who is my Bari? Why should her absence affect me as a man this way? It is not sexual hunger I feel toward you, Bari, because if that is a pleasurable feeling, then why am I frightened at the thought of seeing you naked? It is not desire for your neck and breasts I feel. I have found you alone in the dark so many times, Bari, when I could have done anything. But I was satisfied with the smell of cardamom that came from your mouth and the air warmed from touching your body. I did not feel for you the sharp hunger of sex. Seeing you, my interest was only the inevitable interest of a man . . . I could not reach any conclusion. It seemed to me that in some unconscious way I was nurturing Bari's life, her long cartoon-like body, as a pure unrealized concept.

For a long time I waited aimlessly on the cold bench in Ratna Park and then slowly I went toward home. My mind was heavy with despair. My legs mockingly carried my wearied body. When I got home, I had more whiskey but nothing to eat. For the first time I went to bed with a troubled expression.

I thought, Bari is leaving tomorrow but she is coming back. But my restlessness could not find relief in that. Somewhere inside I struggled and fought against myself. Was I not about to become the victim of a worthless, futile thing like love? Was I

not with my old body, my rough life, my meaningless life about to become the victim of that soft, tender feeling? If so, how could I endure that naked joke? How could I bear that bitter irony?

That night I was suspended between sleep and waking. All night in a dream-like state my nightmares were clouds of cigarette smoke. Many times I felt as if I were choking in the encircling smoke. Many times, suffocating in the smoke, I struggled to get away. All night I was frightened by a golden-brown head and by nicotine-stained fingers passing lightly over my neck. As hard as I tried to get rid of her, all night a woman of five feet three inches, with closely cropped hair, stayed with me. Getting up for a drink of water, parched with thirst, I felt sorry for myself. Almost hysterical I felt like tearing the silence of the night with my cry, "Bari, I think I am falling in love with you." But I was afraid that I could not bear the burden of that joke. Like a boil erupting in an awkward place, to whom could I reveal my condition? I tried to get through the night by smoking. I thought, how weak I am and how beaten! Did I survive the bullets of the Japanese to suffer this mockery now? Did I save my life to make it absurd with the torment of this situation? It was not easy to deny this hateful truth.

With the light of dawn, I stood at the window letting the cold air restore some alertness to my reddened eyes. My head hurt from lack of sleep and my stomach and chest still felt the effects of whiskey. Covered by a sheet of thin mist, the sky was beginning to lighten. Kathmandu, waking now in its

ashen color, looked very deserted. Deliberately I washed my face and took out the new suit which I had worn only once before for Bari's brithday.

Because I was not obliged to see Bari off and Shiva Raj had not requested me to, I stopped and lingered a little distance from the bus stop just to see her board the bus and leave. Like a mangy dog hesitant to go into unfamiliar territory, I stood, without courage or hope, in the background, afraid that someone might see me.

She arrived with a bag hanging from her arm and Shiva followed carrying a larger bag. She and a servant got on the bus and for a long time she went on talking to Shiva Raj from the window. For the first time in my life I was jealous of a man.

When the bus turned the corner and disappeared from sight, not only Kathmandu, but my whole world became silent and empty. Covering my shame, but frightened inside, I kept repeating in my mind, "My dear Sakambari, I love you." As I returned, my every step mocked me; every familiar turn, every familiar shop, every well-known dark lane made fun of me. The street dogs looked at me as they passed by; even the old trucks made me feel defeated. At the mouth of New Road I looked away and fled from a pair of young lovers waiting for the bus.

Love stood as a derision for me. Probably I would have to spend the rest of my life defeated like this, hiding my love for Bari in my heart. Like an embroidered handkerchief in an old soldier's pocket, like a shoot sprouting out of season on an old tree, like pimples on the nose when youth is gone, Bari lay

sprawled in the middle of my heart. This was what mocked me. I endured the irony by laughing at it.

So, I had fallen in love with a girl twenty years younger than me, a woman who was living an absurd life. But what of that? An example of love's blindness, I would go on saying, "Bari, I love you." Love can exist between any two people, but why, my dear Sakambari, should you grant a place in your bosom for this old drunken soldier? Why make a home among the old bones which you yourself have labelled old? Why should you bother your head responding to the love of an old man? Some day I may come to you bringing my commonplace definition of love and blurt out my real feelings and you, I'm sure, will slap me. You will spit in my face.

Before I fell in love my life was meaningless and now also it is meaningless. What am I worth? What is my love worth?

Even in Bari's absence I kept on going to her house, though who knows what satisfaction I found in going. My cigarette smoking increased and in smoking continuously I found some sort of satisfaction. I also found some contentment in touching with my hands the flowers of the insect-killing orchids. That was the extent and the means of my contentment. I had to try to find contentment, I had to try to pass the time or else an unexpressed dissatisfaction kept gnawing at me. How miserable I was! I was creating a circle within which I had to keep myself busy and occupied. Whencver I saw Shiva Raj I took satisfaction in the knowledge that Bari was intimate with Shiva Raj and Shiva Raj was intimate with me. Then I was happy.

After a month she returned, a little thinner. I saw her that evening. Imprisoned within my circle, unable to go beyond its limits, I could not say anything to her. Another day she said to me, "Suyogji, you've gotten thin." And I agreed.

Since her return from the Terai she had not cut

her hair. It had grown long enough to cover her ears and neck. I like long hair on women, so one day I said to her, "Bari, long hair really suits you. You should let it grow." When I went there three days later, she was waiting with an inch of hair. She was like a widow who had come from Hardwar with a shaven head or a madwoman who had just cut her hair. After that I did not dare say anything. I felt wounded and desolate.

But this gratuitous blow and my desolation did not free me from being attracted to her. I thought, how she opposes me. How can I follow her path? She always moves opposite to me. I always go upstream and she goes sailing by in the opposite direction. If I could once turn her about and make her flow in my direction. . . But that is beyond imagining. Thus my story was pitiful and hopeless.

Absurd love and absurd people often go hand in hand. The existence of love is an absurdity and I too was hugging an absurd love in my breast. I was finding out that I had to endure life in a cobweb of pain, that I had to suffer. How difficult it was to get through this life. It passes in loss and emptiness, in getting nothing. Struggling with these thoughts, I walked the streets of Kathmandu, in the lanes, the hotels and bars. There was no way, no place to express myself. Love had dug a deep channel in my breast and had settled there. My thinness made me look older. But what did I care if my years, my skin, my face wrinkled by trouble, made me look old? I was accepting naked reality and I consoled myself by saying, this is man's fate.

The freezing winter days were passing. Kathmandu, Bari's garden, the mimosa trees, the grassy lawn were bared by fog and frost. Like a dog going for shelter, I passed my life with the regularity of the turning earth.

In February Sanu eloped. For some days Shiva Raj went around feeling insulted. Mujura and his mother were resolved on compromise. Mujura said that if they cared for each other no one could do anything about it. They would be able to settle down and build a life. Sanu was not a girl of bad character. When Shiva Raj asked Bari, she merely said, "An impulsive girl. What a hurry she was in to get married!" After that she never spoke Sanu's name and never expressed a desire to see her. She seemed to forget her completely and to become immersed in herself again.

I watched and endured all this without saying anything. It was becoming impossible to live my life as pure ideals and concepts only. The better I knew Bari, the more I became entangled with her, the more I became hypnotized, the more my interest in her sharpened. One word filled my empty brain — it was Sakambari. The more I tried to escape from her, the more I had to be near her. Always, without stop, I thought of her. How ironic! I had grown greedy to have all of Bari. Not the Bari without neck, breasts, head. Not the Bari without a soul, filled only with opposition. An interest in her body grew along with my interest in her. From Bari, a single, whole Sakambari, how could a mentality be separated, how could her charms be separated? I wanted to engulf the whole Bari in my embrace, I wanted her to be sub-

merged in me.

I could not make myself believe in mortality. Nor could I retain the illusion that I did not want her mortal body and loved only her soul. I could not build contentment on the base of this hypocrisy, this false conception. When man is ignorant, he is happy. I needed all of her.

To tell Shiva Raj my trouble would be the same as committing suicide. I had studied the situation well. He might say yes to Mujura, but to hand over Sakambari to an old drunkard would be suicide for Shiva. On no condition would he sacrifice Bari to me. And if I tried to escape from Kathmandu, I would be sure to go mad. It was more unpleasant to think of going away. How could I live if I exiled myself far from the sight of my desire. The thought was suffocating.

Sometimes I wondered if by cleansing myself completely, by revealing completely naked my softened heart and feelings, I might be able to begin a new life, to ask Bari for the gift of life. Forgetting my troubles, my past, my crimes, I must for once measure myself by a touchstone. Maybe she would reject me, maybe hate me, and if she had the strength, maybe she would kill me, but at least a truth would be revealed. At least she would know how Suyog Bir Singh, after letting all the meaningless experiences of his life slip away, after a hollow, empty life, was in his forty-sixth year baring all his feelings to a twenty-four-year-old girl and asking for her response to his true love. At least she would know in what a pitiful condition I loved her. Then I would feel some relief,

some happiness. I wanted to cry out, "Bari, pure Sakambari, let me also be purified, let me live."

With these thoughts, I searched everywhere for a way to express myself, but I could not find any. I lived in pain. I drank her with my whiskey and when I was not drinking, I still kept her with me.

I wondered where I had got to. I weighed my experiences. I wanted to find out whether my life had any value or not, whether the wheels of life had passed over me meaninglessly, whether I had grown old for nothing. I turned the pages of my past history, one by one, and in this way I sought my value. I wondered, who can give me any value, who can give me importance? What place is there for me in this age? What solace may be set apart for my life? What justice is given me at the hands of civilization and progress? What reward at the hands of mankind? Where is my refuge?

The face of a Chin girl appeared before me and, turning her eyes, passed away. I went on thinking of her — strong limbs, skin the color of wheat, clear unself-conscious eyes, tangled hair, she was leaning against a mahogany tree looking for prey. It was about midnight. Unaware of the presence of soldiers camouflaged there, she stood forgetting herself in the voice of the murmuring stream. Illuminated by the moonlight, expressed in the smell of the forest, if anyone can be called a thing of heaven, it was she, in that place. It was not possible just to sit and look at her there alone, ignorant, innocent, unbitten by the worm of self-consciousness.

She did not know, poor thing, that men were everywhere. That at midnight in this vast jungle she was not alone. This was the encampment of the Gurkha regiment. Today or tomorrow the Japanese might be here, there might be a bombardment; many of the soldiers were hiding here in the bushes to kill or be killed. She was troubled by none of this.

If she killed an animal she would eat half of

it raw — a woman descended from men who would cut off a man's head and worship it. Her naked arms shining in the moonlight, she was the focus of my attention. As I watched her, the bonds of my camouflage began to tighten about my throat, the war tormented me. Rebelling, I wanted to come out of the bushes. For a moment life seemed attractive to me. I wanted to plunder that moment. I thought to myself, lovely Chin daughter, not just my life, but yours also has no meaning. On this battlefield of war both of us are insignificant. What hostility is there between you and me? What will you get, what will I get whether the battle is won or lost?

Just yesterday at the invitation of your head-hunter father, I sat, together with your dog, and ate the rice you had set on the mat and the garnished rhinoceros thigh you passed around. It made you very happy to give us a big pot full of whiskey to drink. And after we went outside, it was you who strode toward me carrying a rhino-horn full of whiskey. Since I could not resist your strong arms, I gulped it down. Maybe you were attracted by my strong, firm body and that is why you were saying something to your head-hunter father and pointing at me. How easy-going you were, walking among so many white and brown guests with your thighs completely bare. One could read a gentle expression in your eyes, but what did we soldiers want or need with such feelings? Looking at you I thought of the Kirat women of our hills, but between your father and theirs, there was a great difference.

Maybe this will be the last chapter of our

memories. We may die tomorrow. It is not unlikely. When we were we alltogether, dancing in your courtyard, I really forgot about everything- that death was striding toward us, that I had to fight in the front lines on the Burmese border. Why did you laugh that way when our colonel was dancing? Do you also know how to laugh? Are you also filled with dreams of life? Can you also smile as you fix a flower in your hair and see your face reflected in the clear stream? Do you also feel the throbbing of a young heart? When you were dancing, I was dancing at your side. I was afraid your father might cut off my head if I didn't dance. Your father's body-guards were standing there with spears in their hands. Because of the atmosphere of your house, because of you, I forgot all the days of my life. Like you, our Kirat girls dance on the ridges between the rice-paddies throughout the rainy season, their yellow cheeks, the color of a lovely flower, shaking. If we could always separate ourselves this way from the bitterness of life, no one would need to give us a definition of happiness . . . But then, you forgot about me.

An unbearable despair began to take hold of me. I felt like a leopard ready to pounce from the bushes. I could not keep control of myself. Abandoning the camouflage, I came out of the bushes. Seeing my belt flashing in the moonlight, she started. She fixed an arrow in her bow and looked at me. When she saw my bayonet and gun she put the arrow back. I came up to her. Darkness. Silence. The two of us. That moment was like a sweet dream. In my own language I began to coax her. I called her, queen, my

lovely one. I tried everything, but her wild heart would not yield. She stood there as if she did not understand me.

I began to feel tired. We were going to die and I begged her to give me this one night. Ignoring me she tried to leave. I caught her in my arms, but she pushed me away, I could not catch hold of her. Knocking me down, she moved away; but I could not bear defeat. Besides, as a man I was angered by the behavior of a primitive girl. Immediately I got up and, grabbing her from behind by the hair, I struck her across her tender lips. A thin line of blood flowed from her lips, but the head-hunter's daughter did not hesitate to match her strength with mine. She was not afraid of me. Opening her eyes very wide, she challenged me. Inflamed, unable to control myself, I struck her on the head with my rifle-butt and she fell over, unconscious, into the bushes.

In this way she became mine, completely mine. Who was there in this desolate place? Who was there to see? I could do anything I wanted with this living corpse. I thought, my lovely one, what hostility is there between us? If I am to die at the hands of the Japanese, that is death. And if you die along with your village, that is death, too. There is nothing special about our death. If you die at my hands, that also is only death. Then come to me not for death, but to prove for once that life is meaningful.

I began to play with her. All through the night I toiled with the naked body of a woman. I played with every part of her, enjoyed every pleasure. If I were an animal I would have been satisfied, but my

human instincts were not satisfied. I gave her water to try to bring her to consciousness, but crushed by a gun and a man's passion, she did not move. It did not seem as if I had been playing with her body for a long time. I scratched her naked breasts with my savage nails until they bled. I bit her lips, her cheeks, her neck until they bled.

In the sky the stars were disappearing one by one. The air turned the color of ash. I grew tired. As I held her lifeless body in the bushes, I looked at her. She stared at me without complaint, the headhunter's daughter, as if she were thinking, how uncertain life is, how easy death. On her thighs, her stomach, her breasts, the bruises were clearly visible.

This was her end, the daughter of a headhunter's, an end submerged in the ambition of Hitler, an end as a sacrifice on the altar of British imperialism, an innocent end. With these thoughts, unburdening myself as I abandoned her, I came back. Yet this was something. With this I had proved life meaningful.

From the face of the Chin girl a golden-brown head appeared and vanished. I watched with pain and said again, "My dear Sakambari, to you my life comes for shelter. Don't run away like this. Come. I cannot rape you."

From the pleasant Kachin village of Makhring one could clearly see the part of the forest where the Kachin girl who herded buffaloes blossomed among the thorny roses. As I turned the pages, another leaf of memory was exposed. Her cheeks bloomed with roses all the time and so did her lips. It was May, 1941, the season of roses, and I was strolling in the clearing a little distance from camp with a Jemadar's insignia on my broad shoulders and my chest out like a cock's. It was a holiday. I had soaked my nerves in Kachin whiskey and gone off.

It was dull in the camp with only the company of men. When we saw a recruit with a tender face and delicate features, our nerves grew hot and we felt like teasing him. I did not consider this a sin. In the world of moral regularity, the world that tries to run on moral regularity, a line is drawn between men and women. That fact we had forgotten. If in a world without women, soldiers learned to find satisfaction in homosexual relationships; if, separated from human civilization, their instincts became ac-

customed to an illusion, what guilt was theirs? Our condition was to be pitied. And if a man could not find satisfaction with another man, then he wanted to get away, to drown his desires in whiskey.

"Hi, pal! It looks as if you haven't found a victim." A friend came by, grinning from ear to ear. "There's no trouble finding one," I said and I held a rosebud to my lips. Then I crumpled it in my hand and rubbed it under my heel.

Some tablets of rum left my hand. A tune, "Ho, he railimayi, chan chan garnay khola." A buffalo-herding girl passed nearby, a full-blown rose . . . her face like a yellow rose, her lips like a red one. Her flat nose, her narrow eyes were tempting to a foreigner. I signalled to her with a whistle. She went by disdainfully. I said to her in her language, "Sweetheart, how cruel you are!" I followed her. A soldier was following her and calling to her. Reaching her, I took her arm and showed her some silver coins in my hand and a Burmese ruby ring sparkling on my finger. She looked at them and refused them. Perhaps she was trying to say, "I don't need all this. Learn a little kindness." Caressing her cheek, I made her understand: "Sweetheart, why must you raise a wall of ideals against those who are about to die? Come let me plunder you, and you, too, plunder me." Like a snake hypnotized by the playing of the flute, trusting in me she entered the bushes. Slowly the rose petals twisted and fell from her face. I plundered her to my hearts's content. She looked helpless. After a while, I took the ruby ring from my finger and put it on hers. She did not object. This day was no different

from that night. I thought, we are under a canopy of bombers, in a cage of bayonets, in the smoke of bombs. We have been taking pleasure in life. With her helpless eyes she looked at me as if to say, "Marry me, let us live together, Gurkha; this body is yours." "My sweetheart," I said, to console her, and went away. Arranging her skirt to cover the fresh spots of blood, she raised her hands and meaninglessly wiped two teardrops, her narrow pain, from her small eyes.

Why should she weep? What was there to make her weep? Doesn't she understand that she has got such a precious ring? What have I done to her? I didn't even have to use a knife the way the British do. Here, my affair with her came to an end.

"Hi! What are you doing here?" Another idle friend appeared. I showed him by pointing towards the bushes. He strode off. I felt a little easier.

Soon it was evening. Roll call. Rum call. The sound of the drums brought sadness. Then a monotonous tune, "Ho ho railimayi, chan chan garnay khola, khola railimayi, chan chan garnay khola." A friend put on false breasts and twisting from the waist imitated the style of our Maruni dancers. The voices grew sharper, the drums got louder and I began to forget myself. Heated by the rum, I grew numb.

In the morning a friend reported, "A Kachin buffalo-herding girl was found on the ground, bleeding profusely. She was covered with bruises. Sinners! She was fatally tortured."

An officer reported the orders. "First Seventh Gurkha Rifles battalion order: Companies 1, 2, 3, 4, 5,

long march from Makhring; platoon commander Suyog Bir Singh." I tried to see my face in my sparkling boots. I bade farewell to Makhring and its forest. I gave no importance to my friend's remarks. Bodies bloody from bayonet plunges, stomachs burst by grenades, with their intestines pushed out, vultures hovering over corpse on top of corpse, foxes circling — who has done more, who less? What is death? With his pockets full of the fingers of those who had committed harakiri, carrying the fingers of corpses, a Japanese soldier was surviving on the thin hope of reaching his home. How absurd! I thought, what kind of people are they that the fingers in their pockets do not haunt them? What should we take home, the heads of our enemies?

Entangled with a ruby a rose appears: a golden-brown head merging with a raped rose; shudders. How helpless I am, unable to touch her, unable even to express my affection. Since I could not value the tears and blood of a Kachin, if now I weep any kind of tears, who can understand my grief? Ah, but I need some small refuge. Night after night I want to cry out, "My Sakambari, life may not be so absurd."

Why do you take pleasure in the leaves of the insect-killer orchid? It would suit you so to let your hair grow. Do you like the Chinese stones in your earrings? You also are like a stone.

With a quavering tune, like an English soprano, a marvelous face comes into view. Wrapped in her lungi and blouse, she is like the orchids that bloom in the Burmese forests. My head begins to ache. I am disturbed, but I turn a page of the history. My heart feels torn.

"How's everything, Subedar Suyog Bir Singh?" my friend asked as we came out of the canteen together after having coffee. "Matinchi came again today. Are you thinking of marrying her?"

"No, my friend, she'll feed me horse meat. But she's like a Burmese orchid to look at, Khwannion Pan." I laughed out loud. He knew quite well why I was laughing.

Like the red and purple orchids blooming throughout the forest of Pidaung, Matinchi, a Burmese farmer's daughter, was tempting, lovely, never enough. I often teased her by calling her my Khwannion Pan, and she always blushed like a blossoming flower. I met her often and took freely from her what I wanted. She wanted us to marry and on this basis I

went to sleep the night in her bed or brought her to sleep the night in mine. Without affection and without money, I swallowed down everything, her being, her virginity. And I often told her, "Soon we'll marry, Matinchi."

A British officer got word of my attachment to Matinchi and one day he said bluntly, "Hello, Gurkha Subedar. Why don't you let me share your orchid beauty?" I turned and walked away thinking to myself, "Why should I give anything to the damned pale-eyes? He'll take as much as he can get. We Gurkha soldiers like things that have not been shared."

I had just gotten to know my Khwannion Pan. For some reason I did not like to play with her as I did with the others. I liked to look at her in a special way, perhaps because she always looked at me as her future husband. Without this she would not have agreed. But what good was marriage or settling down if even then one could die with a stomach burst by a grenade?

Today, filling my glass with liquor, her eyes filling also, Matinchi was serving me specially prepared rice. Smelling the relish, I wondered what might be in it, snake or frog? But whatever it was, it was delicious. The atmosphere was sweet, and Matinchi too was sweet.

From behind, she shyly said, "How long should we wait? So many of my friends have settled down with their Gurkha husbands."

"Khwannion Pan," I said, turning and raising her chin, "we'll marry tomorrow or the next day, whatever you like."

All night I looked at Matinchi lying in my arms and thought that tomorrow would never come. Holding me close she said, "What shall we do if we have children?"

Strangle them to death. What good are children in this mess of war? But I did not say that.

"I'll give you as many children as you'd like, don't worry Khwannion Pan. I'm really in luck to get a beautiful wife like you. I won't go home. I'll marry you and we'll spend our lives together growing chili and ginger. How happy we'll be when the war's over!"

But it was not me saying that; I knew that well. Maybe she caught the note of falseness in my solace because she hung on to my shirt collar and began to weep and said, "But I won't let you go today. I had a terrible dream. Dear Gurkha, if you leave me it will be like killing me." Today for some reason Matinchi's tears would not stop. Nothing could comfort or please her. Her tears kept on flowing but I remained as unmoved as a rock. She did not notice that I was beginning to get angry. I thought, these women, how weepy they are! They must keep a pot full of tears behind their eyes so that any time they weep they can pour out a flood of tears. What good is a life of tears? What fools! When I was ready to go Matinchi fell at my knees weeping. I tried to get away from her but I could not. I gave a strong kick at her tender breasts and ran off toward the barracks.

"British Colonel Stephen cried all night, thinking of his wife and children," my bunk-mate told me.

Laughing I said, "What a good-for-nothing! How can they keep such a small-hearted man as the colonel here." But Stephen should weep, he and I and many others.

Our battalion had to advance immediately to the front lines of Phalam district. Japanese paratroopers were invading the frontier. Tojo's hordes were everywhere. This was the moment of death, the chance to get a V. C. My blood began to boil, my hand went automatically to the handle of my khukuri.

"Number 3250 Subedar Suyog Bir Singh." The British captain slapped me on the back. But he did not know what a worthless man I was. Day after tomorrow Matinchi would wait with a glass filled with liquor. On her breast the bruises would still be painful but she would love even the pain of the Gurkha soldier's boot and would wait for the right moment for him to become her husband. But I will have gone far from the forests of orchids, far from the pleasures of life, far from meaning. When Mantinchi learns that her Gurkha soldier has fled, she may try to hang herself or take poison, an easy death.

I felt like laughing. What had I done to her? Plucking a tender young orchid, I had trampled it under my boot. What more had I done? If this much is a crime, if this much is a stain, then life is not worth living. Don't cry, my Khwannion Pan, thinking of a treacherous Gurkha soldier, because he also is going to the altar to be sacrificed.

Sakambari's shorn head came swimming toward me through Matinchi's tears. I tried to clasp it, but it vanished. I recognize that there is no end to

misery in life. Even in the mouth of death I did not die.

"Ni yedye phujha, ni yedye phujha
Souyo, chouyo, jhe jhe kha . . . "

The soprano tune thrust me back to the world of reality. Once again I felt as if my heart were being torn.

Perhaps to go on suffering this way is my solace in life; perhaps this is my refuge. Then I ask of my age an award for contentment.

Death Valley. Death Valley. This is what it means to carry the burden of life. This is the life to which a living corpse came, completely emptied. I thought of the border of Assam, of getting rice and red dal in a mess-tin. Now there is nothing left in me, nothing left in my body, which survived the life of ragged pants and khaki shirts, the malaria of the equatorial forests. I am completely vacant. My sins, which I'm not even prepared to admit as sins, were washed away by Death Valley. Absurdly I survived and got to come home.

Three mess-tins piled high with rice, watery dal, pumpkin curry bland as an omelet – thinking of these things my mind traveled back to Death Valley . . . Why go on living? How to get out alive? But my body, almost a corpse, kept on crawling. Let them alone! Let them alone! Let the sick live or die. Humanity has washed its hands of them. Do you despair? Maybe you will survive. As long as there is breath there is hope.

I had dysentery from eating unripe mangoes

and chili. I suffered from malaria. The big mosquitoes of the equatorial forests had presented me with it. I had no shoes. Everything was like a dream. Nothing was left of Subedar Suyog Bir Singh's healthy body. There were shadows on my face. I could barely move. But I did not want to die. I thought, why die here like a worm or an insect? Let us go on and see what happens. But my arms and legs were limp. With no khukuri, no courage, no pride, no dignity, I begged my friend who was with me, "Let's stay here today. I'm awfully weak from the fever."

My friend had brought a bag of raw potatoes. There were no matches. Eating the raw potatoes, he said, "Today they dropped some food by parachute for the dying, but there are only tea leaves." We were both depressed. Rubbing his stomach he said, "I wonder what there is in these trunks." A thin veil of greed was visible in his eyes. At that moment he looked like a man. The heavy boxes left by the British were all locked up. Inside how many diamonds and pearls there might be! Gold maybe, silver coins, paper notes backed by gold, Parker and Shaeffer fountain pens, who knows what else? If we were only a little stronger . . . We were helpless. We stared at the boxes with our mouths watering.

"There's a dry spot among those bamboo trees. Let's sleep there tonight, Suyog."

I crawled there. Flooded by the red evening sun, a small stream ran by the bamboo grove. Putting my mouth to it, I quenched my thirst and went back to the dry spot to lie down. My friend was sharpening an instrument that looked like a piece of a

can. Looking at me, he said boldly, "If we find a dead cow as we did yesterday, this will be useful."

"You'll eat it raw?" My voice trembled.

"It has to dry for a while in the sun."

He seemed much more alive than me because he was not touched by malaria. Looking at him and then at myself I started thinking. In this condition we would eat anything, in any form. We live just to keep on breathing. We men are like the worms that live in beer. We have to keep going wherever we are. What would happen if we killed ourselves here? Why are we compelled to go on crawling like dung worms? We are born only to eat. Now we eat anything. After a century, when there are hordes of men, like germs, what will we eat? The rocks and soil will not supply us. We will eat the leaves of trees and the earth will be smooth and naked like the woods after the locusts have left them bare. Thinking of food, I saw before my eyes the officers' mess — roast, pudding, paratha. My mouth filled with water. The other day we had snatched from a fleeing Sikh a handful of uncooked rice and eaten it. Today raw potatoes. What would we eat tomorrow? Each other or our own flesh?

Night fell. I heard the sound of the insects chirring in the woods along with the thumping of the heart within my convulsed body. The hollow bamboo crackled. I was shaking with fever, my throat was parched. Where were the beer and whiskey? In my imagination I saw a pot full of beer, and I swallowed my saliva.

My friend was not sleeping. Breaking the silence he called, "Suyog . . ."

"What's the matter?"

"Can't you sleep? Look at what the war has done to us! Do you think we can get back alive?"

"Do you expect to get back dead? We'll get out alive, don't worry." But then I burst into complaint and cried out as if delirious from the fever, "What do we get whether the war is won or lost? If we do get out we'll have nothing to believe in. Especially me, especially me. Ah, me."

"Don't talk too much, Suyog. If your fever gets worse you won't be able to walk tomorrow."

Tomorrow came. We went on, staggering up the stony, steep hills lying in the brilliant sun. Here and there in the crevices of the rocks were small rhododendron bushes. I thought, in our country too red rhododendrons are blossoming. Red rhododendrons! But in our country the bushes are not so small. I thought of my home. I wanted to weep at the foot of the rhododendrons. A shady spot, cool air from the Himalayas, green flowing water. What a curse in the difference! Ah! The sun-scorched maze of stones, rhododendron bushes maimed by bombs. Someday perhaps these fossils will show what a curse we suffered, how we traveled this way bearing on our shoulders the burden called life.

On the way there was a corpse of a Punjabi woman lying on her side with a baby sucking at her nipple. The fossil should keep it just this way. I called to the vultures, "Don't peck at these corpses. They are a souvenir of war."

Sunken eyes, unshaven beard and moustache, blackened face, tattered pants, a shirt full of holes.

My friend and I looked at each other and laughed. It was a feeble laugh, a pitiful laugh. Perhaps the nearby stones seeing man's progress felt like laughing the same feeble laugh.

Days passed, nights passed, months passed. We reached the border of Assam alive. Our lives returned with us. Eating rice and dal I wondered . . . what about our lives after this, my life? Where are my V. C., my medals, my commendations? In me there is a worthless heart, the scars of the wounds of two or three crimes, a pair of lungs, that's all.

Sakambari, is it so that there is nothing within me but a desert, a tomb? Is there proof that my right to love has been torn away? I know you are not ready, even if your life depended on it, to give shelter to an old drunken soldier. But why do I linger embracing your cartoon-like body in my imagination?

Always a golden-brown head eludes my reach, moves far away. I watch confused.

The woods and hills of Kathmandu, quickened by the final touch of winter, were turning green with the coming of spring. On the horizon a line of fine haze had settled through which the sun rose and set. I often found myself walking about vacantly, unable to express my feelings. Many feelings and impulses and entreaties rose and set within me. I could not do something simple like going to express my love directly or writing a letter. No avenue of expression suited me. I could not be bold but neither could I endure or forget. I felt more beaten than ever.

One day the sisters were sitting and chatting on the lawn. They were not at all suspicious about my going to their house. I always went, but except for the garden, Shiva's living room and their mother's room, I never even peeped into any of the other rooms. Bari was usually in Shiva's living-room.

When Bari saw me she said something that made Mujura laugh. She herself was not the kind to laugh. Under the pretext of walking toward the orchids, I tried to hear their talk. Bari screamed at me,

"Suyogji, come on over." I went closer. Bari was in a joking mood. "What's the matter with you these days?" If Mujura were not there I would have told her what was the matter. She went on quickly, "You're burned black! How much whiskey you must drink! Look at his eyes, how red they are. Why are your lips so blue?" Mujura, unable to keep her balance, rolled over. I was terribly embarrassed.

Trying to end the matter I said, "That's enough, Bari, enough. When you talk, you say whatever you like." I looked at her with miserable eyes. "Last night a street dance came by and I stayed up all night to watch it." I had also had a lot to drink but I kept that to myself.

"Oh, did watching the street dance keep you awake?"

"No I watched the street dance because I wanted to stay awake."

"Brother Suyog perhaps suffers from the disease of staying up all night, too." Mujura looked at the ground as she spoke.

Why couldn't Sakambari understand the pain that was visible in my wretched eyes? But why should she understand it? In the same mood she went on. "You're always wearing a different suit these days, Suyogji. What's the matter? What are you planning to do in your old age?"

The truth was biting. Perhaps the word irony had originated in just such a situation. Taking out my cigarettes I lit one and offered one to Bari. She caught hold of it in her yellowed fingers. I wondered how or where this woman could be controlled. What

substance could melt her? What truth could touch her? Was my life to be entangled with Bari as if with a mirage? Must I always linger with unquenched thirst? I had become so helpless. I was powerless. I wanted to ask Bari, who are you going to marry, who do you like? But it seemed to me she was not looking toward the future. She was like a stone inside.

Shiva arrived. We went to the living room and began to talk. I was beginning to believe that Shiva had cultivated me as a drinking companion only. He had no other need to be intimate with me. But in giving me the freedom and familiarity of his house, did he perhaps want to give me Mujura? Maybe, maybe not. In our talk that day, Shiva said that he was going to keep Bari at home this year. Then he would send her to college since she was so bright. After she had passed her B. A. he would think of marrying her. He was looking for someone who was educated and very cultivated. When I heard that I sat there as mute as the chair I was sitting on. I felt defeated. Unable to carry on a decent conversation, I went out saying I was going to wait in the garden.

Bari was sitting in the shade of a mimosa tree a little to the side of the door. Wearing a black sari, sitting and pondering in a patch of shade in the mellow evening, she seemed like a conception. If only I could have sat very close to her then, caressing her brown hair, and said, "For your sake I am forced to live this life more painful than crawling through Death Valley, Bari. Do you believe that life can be restored?" And other such words.

I wanted to dissolve, to become one mind, one

body with her as she sat in the dim shadow. I wanted to lose myself. I thought, surely this is no mirage, this is solid fact. If I walk over I can reach her, I can have her. But I could not yield to this momentary illusion. I was just teasing and mocking myself. I wanted to be merged in her body and her soul but there was no way. I did not want to be unsuccessful; I did not want to prove that I had no future.

Love should not bring such pain to life. There are many ways for people to be happy, but how. . .? I could not argue the point any further. I was useless. Those whom I had raped I could not love and the one I loved I could not rape. It was impossible. I could not even imagine such a thing. I was certain that love was nothing but misery and futility. Otherwise why did I feel untroubled by the fatal crimes against the headhunter's daughter, the buffalo-herding girl or Matinchi, when just looking at Sakambari today and caring for her made me so miserable?

What crime have I committed against you? I wanted to cry out that love is misery. I recognized that Bari was really nothing more than an insect-killer orchid, though the flowers she had planted were fluttering in the air, fulfilled by life. That is why she had said, "How interesting it is to watch the insects being killed here." But the desires of life are not so easily set right. I was not ready to be resigned; I never would be. As the shadows of evening grew deeper, Shiva and I passed by her and went out. What greed I felt for that one patch of darkness!

For the second time since I had met Bari the mimosa trees were blossoming with blue flowers. And blue flowers falling on the lawn were offering welcome to white, white legs. How quickly a year had passed. The trees are able to blossom again, but we are not. How helpless we are.

A little distance from the compound I began to feel jealous of those flowers. I felt there should be no blue flowers blossoming anywhere else in the world. To no avail these flowers came to haunt me in my dreams. They were not flowers but sparks of fire.

It was just evening. I was certain that Shiva Raj was not at home, but I went there pretending to be looking for him. I had spent many days pretending; why should I be afraid or ashamed to do it again? I was greedy. Sometimes when I went there on this pretext and Shiva Raj was not at home, Bari would come, whether it was dark or light, and talk with me.

Blue shadows from the blue hills, the road

blue with the blue flowers, a pleasant breeze . . . but my thoughts made me sad. I went there like a pilfering dog. As scon as I entered the main gate I saw Bari standing in the very same place I had seen her last evening. I wondered what she was looking for, coming at this time every day to the same fixed place. She was standing facing the house and could not see me. Making her very own a patch of tempting evening darkness, standing there with her shorn golden-brown head poised on her slender white neck, she seemed once again like a picture to me . . . a picture which I wanted to keep before my eyes for the rest of my life though looking at it brought me no peace.

A thin line of smoke wavered and vanished in the air. I thought that if I went straight into the house without her noticing and she complained, I would say I had not seen her. Then in a joking mood I went up behind her. But how can you beguile reality? In the shadow of the tree I could watch from behind the golden-brown head and the white neck. Though that head was beyond my reach, though the neck was a mirage, today I could look my fill. I went on looking. This much, I could boast, I had had of Bari, her defeat and my victory. This, I had to admit, was the limit of my satisfaction Loving her, looking at her thirstily this way– this was my life. Oh! How cheated I was, how foresaken!

As I went on locking at her, I began to feel enraptured. A wonderful vibration spread along my nerves. I forgot where I was. Spurred, involuntarily, by a strange emotion, expressing all the love I felt, I

called out, "Bari."

Startled, she looked around and then, her face brightening, called, "Oh, it's you, Suyogji."

"Come here."

Like an obedient child she came very close as she always did and asked, "Why?"

I was not in control of myself. I was unable to realize the situation consciously. My whole body was trembling. Impassioned, I caught hold of her white neck and kissed her soft lips.

Feeling no satisfaction I lost my desire. As if awakened from a frightening dream I was completely soaked with sweat; my heart was trembling. What could I do? I could not change the situation. I could not take back my boldness. I felt dizzy. The mimosa trees and Sakambari, too, began to seem for away.

Gathering all my power to control myself, I looked at Bari. She also was bewildered. I was beaten like a dog, like a goat. There was nothing for me to do but endure any humiliatian, any response. I stood there ready to meet reality openly. I was able to study the expression in her eyes. From behind her glasses she looked deeply into me. Then she strode off and disappeared through the door. Her look was new, completely new. I had seen her in many situations, but her eyes had never been like this. What did she want to do to me with her look? Why did that glance go straight to my heart to bruise it? Why didn't she protest? Why didn't she pounce on me or scream out? Why didn't she make some noise? I was crazed with this inner struggle. It seemed as if the sky above me was shaking. Asking

myself question after question I turned away.

How strange that she went straight into the house. What is she going to do? As I walked I thought of the expression in her eyes. It was certainly not approval, but it was not rebellion either, nor anger, nor shame. Perhaps she was trying to say, "Suyogji, I didn't expect this from you." Certainly she was amazed. Had I attacked a faith that she had preserved throughout her life? Had I burned a pure and egotistical woman with my spirit when I tasted her with these blue lips? Had I once again committed a crime, a sin?

This was a situation which it was impossible to resolve. I consoled myself by saying that there is no use regretting what is past. I could expect to fall very low in their eyes, to prove myself, in Shiva's view, a base person, a traitor. Sakambari would spit at me. This was the emotion of my true love, my first love.

It was a question of prestige for Bari, of self-esteem. I had to bear whatever happened. Bari would tell her brother and Shiva . . .? Who knows what would happen? On the other hand, I thought, why should I expect such humiliation? Perhaps Bari would not tell anyone and finding me alone would ask, "Suyogji, why did you do that the other day?" So frank at our first meeting and since then so straightforward, was it not possible that she would accept these events casually as part of life. Then I would bare my heart and say to her, I truly love you. I have no evil thoughts about you. For so many months I have been suffering, trying to tell you this

so that you will know how miserable I have become from wanting you, how helplessly I have been seeking refuge in you. It is your victory, my defeat. Like a bright streak of lightning among the dark clouds of a threatening storm, I thought of this as a thin hope. My heart felt lighter.

Night fell. I wandered aimlessly on the streched-out streets and tried to find relief. I wished the street would never end, the situation never change so that the reality of life might be submerged in them. The lamp posts disappeared one by one. Like a procession of dark and light, light and dark, they went by mocking me. Today, I thought, I am more worthless, more miserable than I have ever been. This is my greatest degradation.

Beginning to hear the noises of the city, the coming and going of the buses, I took refuge in an out-of-the-way tavern. Whatever else, I must not meet Shiva Raj today.

Relentlessly the next day came. In the same way it passed. I did not dare leave the house. All day I stayed huddled in bed. My eyes grew even redder. I thought that one should never have to be the victim of pain that cannot be expressed. Man must be open, like a room without a curtain. Then he will be happy. But how to express these petty affairs?

Life is a place where we must trace a path of contentment. We must accept and treasure every fragment of experience lying scattered in the road. If life were like that we would have nothing to complain about. But opposed to this, I had not traced a path of contentment. I wanted to live a life without obstacles and since, in the past, I had not abandoned my life to deep love I was not easily able now to accept the painful outcome and master it. I had not reached that point. It would not have been impossible for me, a man emerging from the habit of emptiness, to create a circle of contentment and confine myself within it. But that was another matter and

I was not ready for it.

In the evening I went out to watch the continuing procession on the streets that stretched out in all directions. New Road was heavily crowded. Different types of people went by, each living in accordance with his own habit. But their individuality began to fade. All were the victims of chaos, but they had learned how to run smoothly. I thought, I also must become an orderly person and fit into a niche here. I must laugh, speak, eat, live. When we are used to a routine, even if it is mismanagement, it goes on as the motion of our life. There has been a place for me until now and there will be in one way or another. What is my problem? The newspapers painted with problems, the faces printed with problems merge into each other. How am I separate? Here there is a routine in the problems too. Here life is a routine. Here the motion of life is habit . . . Deep in thought I walked among the dark, dark heads.

I reached the peepal tree. Lighting a cigarette, blowing out the smoke, I began to lose myself in looking closely at each passerby. For a moment my head felt lighter. A rickshaw-driver was cursing a shoe-shine boy near him with every filthy word imaginable. I saw that there was immense satisfaction on his face. I thought, he is content because he has expressed himself. What's the difference if it's cursing? A girl tourist was coming, tossing her cropped golden-brown head in a certain way. Behind her trailed a beggar boy blowing out a cloud of cigarette smoke. At once the golden-brown head and the

smoke thrust me back from the world of escape to reality. I watched them as long as I could.

In the purple light of electricity night came slowly, winding along New Road. It was night but there was no darkness. All night long we can go roaming and drinking. This is what Kathmandu has become. Throughout the whole night, the heads of men never disappear from the streets.

For a long time I stood there, smoking continuously. Even after the crowd had begun to thin, I stayed in Bhugol Park for awhile. The bars and restaurants around me were inviting, but it was necessary to escape even from them today. After a time I looked at my watch. I thought that now Shiva Raj would be hurrying home. Perhaps he had already gone or maybe he had not even come, today. Walking very slowly I went and peeked into a bar. The smell of beer and whiskey mingled with the sound of bottles and glasses, the language and intonation of drunkards. Keeping in tempo, some sitting, the less lazy standing, they were doing their own versions of the twist. The routine inside the bar deviated in no way from the routine of the age. I thought, they also are expressing themselves in their haphazard performance of the twist. But I have no way to express myself, no pose I can assume.

Then I noticed Shiva Raj, still there in a corner, getting very high. Certainly Shiva Raj must be waiting for me. Otherwise he would have left by this time. And maybe Shiva was high today because of me. Oh well! The situation could not be changed.

Seeing me, Shiva Raj spoke with emotion,

"Come here, Suyogji, I've been waiting for you." I was surprised. With even more emotion, Shiva Raj said, "Today I can go home late, Bari isn't feeling well. When she's this way she doesn't leave her room."

"Bari isn't feeling well." At that moment the words did not even touch me. Instead I felt light with relief because Bari had not taken any action. Shiva knew nothing of all this. I felt buoyant, like someone who has just come out from swimming. I loved someone deeply and to possess her spirit and body, to posses her completely, I had made my life uncomfortably bitter. To feel buoyant, to be relieved-this was not my intention or goal or need. Though this is what filled my being, in that compelling moment I forgot everything except that here was sweet relief. Between Bari and me something had passed and I would never, I could never seek to escape from the world, from her; not because there was no place to escape but because I was greedy for her response.

Finding Shiva Raj in a normal state today, a huge chunk of the humiliating reaction I was expecting fell away. It seemed like a wonderful dream. There was nothing peculiar about Bari being unwell.

I thought, Shiva Raj is a person who fits in very well with this routine. For no reason this man lives in nothingness. Without meaning he escapes. From the start he has avoided reality and lived to forget himself. Bari's illness gave him also a kind of relief. Was he flying from Bari? He did not really want to escape from her. He was only trying to get

moments of release from that limitless misery whose irresistible presence lies behind the carefree existence we call life. But is life only such release?

Were we not face to face with that inert presence? Were we not mouth to mouth with it? In its very embrace? If so and if Shiva Raj, putting on the mask of pretense, was trying to forget that presence to find release, then doubtless he knew how to live. He had created a routine for himself, in his own way, cut to his own pattern. I decided this was also a special way of self-forgetfulness. Shiva was a yogi, a saint.

Accepting the glass he raised to my mouth, I happened to look into the small drunken eyes of Shiva Raj. He was drunk and so was I. Gradually the glasses were emptied. Shiva Raj who had been animated began to feel sluggish, just as I was feeling more lively. When the customers, at first full, then flowing, then empty, had begun to leave, Shiva Raj looked at his watch and said, "Do you want to stay awhile, Suyogji?"

I nodded my head in agreement. Shiva Raj had drunk much more than usual, but what advice can one drunkard give another? The penetrating melodies of Beethoven's music came from the radio, troubling my mind.

Because Shiva Raj continued to drink, I said I had to go home and took him out. I walked my cycle along King's Way, past Rani Pokhari. Shiva staggered along. Putting him on the cycle I said goodbye and went toward Ratna Park alone. I felt then the need for darkness and solitude.

Sitting on a cold bench I began to realize that no man can ever be alone. What we call solitude is only an illusion. We abandon the wretched world, but it would be better if we could abandon ourselves, get away from our innermost selves. From beside the bench came the sound of sweet, light laughter. Turning around I saw a couple caressing each other freely and without restraint. The scent of darkness was enough for them. To agree 'this is darkness' was enough for them. I wanted to go away but I did not. What was the use? Where in this world is there a curtain? It was enough to pretend not to see. We are accustomed to doing that. What reality is not naked here? Deliberately saying 'there is a curtain,' we deceive ourselves for nothing.

But I could not go on sitting there. They were trying to hide and I was trying not to see them. As the intensity of their love grew, I could not bear it. Getting up I walked slowly away toward home.

After a week the event had eased a little; at least it seemed that way to me. Now it did not cause the pain of a fresh infection; it had opened and was less painful. The situation seemed closer to normal.

After that I did not go to the bar. Without me Shiva Raj would not be alone. He had many other friends whom he saw, not at home, but outside. That is why he did not come looking for me. Probably Bari had told him nothing. Why should she tell her brother such things?

That was a strong consolation for me, but still I was unusually restless. Suppose Bari told no one. What was she thinking? Most likely she was not sick, but what was the matter with her? Should I end the story this way by not going to Shiva Raj's house? That was not what I wanted. I was looking for a different life. For that I would have to go there. Wavering back and forth, I finally went back again to that door. It is impossible to say how many thoughts drove me with their collective strength,

how many desires brought me to that house.

Everything in the garden, the gate, the mimosa branches heavy with flowers, welcomed me as if nothing were changed. The blue flowers were just as blue. The green lawn was just as green. There was no flaw anywhere. From behind I saw Mujura hanging out her sari to dry on the pomelo tree. Seeing me, she smiled widely. Mujura was proof that nothing had happened in this house. I felt a great renewal of strength.

Mujura came toward me and said in her mild voice, "Brother Shiva has gone to the city. Please wait. Bari isn't feeling well." As she said it, there was no uneasiness in her face. This is what I had heard from Shiva in the bar and now, seven days later, Mujura was repeating the same thing. But now Bari's illness troubled me. Then I had felt a sweet relief, but now it was a throat-catching reality. I was sure that my way was not open. I could not even ask what kind of illness Bari had. I felt I had no right to ask and I was afraid that if I asked I would expose the naked truth. Eventually it must come out, but this was not the moment. But surely she was not seriously sick. Neither Shiva Raj nor Mujura looked troubled when they talked about it.

Saying I had to do some work, I left without entering the house. Mujura did not object. On the way I started to wonder about the real meaning of Bari's illness. Why was she sick? What was wrong with her? Was she just, not feeling well or was she really sick? Was she unable to walk about, to eat, even to chatter? There could be other reason for her

illness, yet it was from that very day that she had been unwell. What was Bari's intention? I began to feel anxious. Was my path blocked by Bari's illness? No. Certainly not. Whether Bari was sick or well, I knew my situation was the same, though it would be better for Bari to be well. In one mind it seemed that I was not necessarily the cause of Bari's illness. Shiva Raj had said that Bari was once the victim of a heart disease and that because she was weak he had not sent her to college but had had to keep her at home. She could be sick for any reason. But such consolation was not my goal. I did not want to evade the situation.

With question growing out of question, I too began to feel as if I might be ill. My head felt heavy. It was about noon now. Where could I go? What could I do to forget? Building and tearing down a hundred baseless thoughts, I went straight home. I did not come to any special conclusion. How could I? Bari was really an insect-killer orchid. She would not rest until she had killed me. I regretted the day I met Shiva Raj, the day Shiva Raj took me to his house. Oh how I wanted to erase those days one by one from the pages of my history! It was not as easy to play with life as one thought. At home a tempting thought attracted me. I thought I would leave Kathmandu. Love is pain. Sitting in the chair, closing my eyes, I saw her moving her nicotine-stained fingers and saying, "If a flower buds for itself and, as if accepting some compulsion, falls, whether it fights the black-bee or not, then why should it fall suffering the sting of the black-bee? It falls only for itself. It

falls by its own will."

I kept saying to myself, live, Bari, live. For your own sake live. Let others die. Why you? It is enough for me that I had the chance to touch you.

The stall-keeper's wife died sooner than was expected. The stall-keeper was taking care of three or four children as well as the shop. The boy stopped coming now that there was nothing there for him. I did not know whether he was happy or sad, but it could be said in all truth that he had certainly not accepted love in the form of misery. He had no knowledge of how absurd love was. The stall-keeper's wife died enjoying herself. Now he felt free of the shadow of the door within the stall and the darkness of the ground-floor. Now there was nothing to be hidden. I began to think, love has no worth. Just as the darkness of the ground-floor and the shadow of the door are not the worth of their love, so the burning torment inside me is not the worth of my love.

I wondered whether I was under some delusion. Was I not being a traitor to myself? Should I deny all this which was passing like a dream? Could I be happy if I denied it? Impossible. But what happiness did I have now from accepting it? Which feeling was stronger? Where could man find happiness? What man was happy? If I went mad would I be happy? If I killed myself would I be happy? I felt as if I were choking. I got up and drank some water and paced up and down the room. One after another each old wound began to torment me. In touching Bari I had not done a good thing. I would flee. I had to flee. I wanted to cry out, man is always helpless.

The bend to which our routine lives had come was bewildering. I tried to run away from Kathmandu but I could not. I no longer imagined that my life would be better if I went away. I had to admit it was a change, but a change which had no special meaning and which brought no pleasure. In comparison to such a change, my former condition was much happier. My new wound no longer hurt but it was as if the scar had deformed a part of my body so that I was startled every time I looked at it. I had to walk about with that deformity, to exhibit it.

Several days later I went again and was struck by the more serious announcement that Bari was not getting better. She was nowhere to be seen. She did not even come into Shiva Raj's living-room. Some days after that Shiva Raj, on the road, said that for some reason Bari was not getting better. But this time he was not pleased, he did not feel any relief. I could not find the power to ask him what was the matter. I knew that I was not only base and criminal, but a worthless coward as well.

Now the cause and meaning of Bari's illness were quite clear to me. There was no doubt. I was certain that no-one but Bari and me knew of that event or ever would. I thought, I am weak and cowardly, but Bari is not. What is the matter with her that she is keeping silent this way? Has no one asked her? Isn't she bursting to talk? Why isn't she reacting? Her character never suggested this behavior.

As these questions crossed my mind, I thought immediately of several possible conclusions. But how could I confide my speculations to anyone? How could I understand anyone from the outside? Possibly Bari is remaining silent, restrained by the weight of ego, of pride, of shame. Or possibly she is like this because of Shiva Raj's faith in her. Or perhaps having been touched by the blue lips of an old drunken soldier she is burning to ash in the fire of hate. All these were possibilities and in all of them I found one burden: that Bari hated me or was beginning to.

I found the situation in which I was caught very difficult. Life had become bitter. Not being able to see Bari was one torment. Having to accept the deformity of my scar and her hatred was another, My days and nights passed in heaviness. I had the distinct feeling that I was crawling.

The persistent report that Bari was not well and was not getting better was a problem for Shiva Raj as well as me. I saw it clearly in his behavior. Though he did not want to stay late at the bar, he forced himself to. Though he found no relief in all

this, he forced himself to go home late. I thought to myself that now Shiva Raj was uneasy in the embrace of reality. Now he could not escape, nor even pretend to. I realized that I had infected Shiva Raj as well as Bari.

Once at the bar he said with a frown, "Suyogji, I don't know why, but Bari isn't getting any better. If you go to her room you'll see how thin she's become. It will frighten you." A look of helplessness came into his listless eyes. His words brought an unbearable pain, as if my insides were being sawed by a brand-new blade. In a dream, I took a glass of whiskey in my hand and said only, "Yes." I sat there for a while looking down.

I could see that Shiva Raj was getting thinner day by day. Under his listless eyes pale blue shadows were forming, proof that without the liveliness of Bari he was becoming lifeless. Here, it was Shiva Raj's condition, not mine, that was pitiable. Whenever he was sitting among friends, making a pretense of laughing, trying in vain to lose himself in the lines of his cheeks wrinkled by pain, then I wanted to clasp his hand and say, "Shiva, you can't escape. It is better for us to admit that this 'sweet relief' is not the reality of our two lives."

But always instead of saying this, I would pour him shot after shot until he was half-dead. Nothing else could be expected of a worthless man like me who was unable to approach the truth. In the lifeless lines of his cheeks, in his feeble laugh, I could always read his heart. But I was not a man who without a struggle could lift the curtain and say

to Shiva, "In betrayal of your trust, I have killed Bari and, in betrayal of your trust, Bari has broken her faith."

It seemed to me that the talk of Bari's illness was a fog which enfolded Bari and me directly and Shiva Raj indirectly and that it would probably never be dispelled. We would never be able to lift the curtain and see each other. Would our end be like this?

I was surprised to think of the way Shiva Raj cared for Bari. Couldn't that affection be dug out of his brain? Why did we have to be attracted to each other like magnets? Couldn't we survive separately? Why were we so aware of each other? Why were we always miserable? Shiva Raj loved Bari in vain; his love for her was useless. What could she give him in exchange?

One day, two days, a week, a month passed in the same way. We showed no progress. Bari was sick, a sickness without cause. That is, she would not tell anyone anything. According to what Shiva Raj said, I guessed that she was trying to survive but that she spurned life, that she had abandoned her faith in living. Bari ate, talked, slept, but she was sick. Shiva Raj had done everything for her but everything proved useless. He was determined somehow to make her well so that she would come to his living-room as usual, no matter what time it was, to talk with him. But things were going opposite to Shiva Raj's will.

At last Shiva Raj made a decision. "Suyog, I think Bari may not live. I'm going to take her to the Terai. Perhaps the climate will have some effect."

At that moment his eyes looked as if they were weeping. With the same expression he said, "If anything happens to Bari I can't go on living. Really, I'll kill myself." His trembling words went on vibrating in my nerves like an electric current, but I merely looked at him as though I were a dumb animal. I could understand what he felt but not his language and I could return the feeling but not with words.

The fact that Bari might be going to the Terai did not this time come as a mockery of my existence, a joke, an empty loneliness. This time I was not really troubled about her going to the Terai because if I had any courage at all I could stop her.

I was beginning to get entangled in my problems. If anything happened to Bari, Shiva Raj would kill himself. When this thought ran through my mind, I saw myself standing in front of Shiva Raj, like a dumb animal pawing at the ground. When I thought that Bari never for a moment knew that I had been worthless and criminal all my life, I felt like a dark well that has swallowed up many living corpses looking to the sky for an alliance. But the most desperate problem was that when I had been so helpless and miserable I had fallen victim to my emotion and that what Bari probably thought was monstrous, was no crime against her at all, no sin. Would Bari ever know this secret? I was anxious for her at least to know how I had been suffering for her sake. If divinity exists anywhere, it was in that

moment; if there is any god, he must have been incarnate in that moment. I had to have a chance to show her that.

The struggle grew inside me until I reached the decision to go and confess. I would say to her, "Bari, give me one moment of understanding, look at me from any side and I will be content. Forget that I found you alone and touched you. Please forget that. It is not the kind of incident that should take root in any mind. Forget that anything happend between us. You ought to take the affairs of life more casually as others do. Remember that men are aggressive toward women and that if they find them alone, they will seize the chance. Only think the same thing of me, obscure my deepest feeling in that cheap convention and I will be content. Forgive my boldness. Or tell Shiva and curse me. Any punishment, I am ready to accept any punishment. But Bari, this mist must be dispelled. We must free ourselves from this darkness." I will speak, I will. With this certainty I managed to get through the night.

Once more the blue mimosa flowers were gradually falling, fulfilling under compulsion their season with the branches. The morning, transparent from a recent rain, soothed me like a clear mind. The house was the same, the lawn was the same, the blossoms of the insect-killer orchid moved in the air in the same way. I remembered that on this patch of ground I had seen the golden-brown head of Bari one morning in the midst of clouds of smoke, like a wonderful work of art. How lively my interest in her had been that day, and today how helpless.

There was no-one outside. I had come to seek a final resolution. I had come in the hope, not the certainty of a final refuge, to arrange the rest of my days.

For some reason, Shiva Raj's cook was standing at the front door. Startled at seeing me she said, "Sir, beloved Bari died this morning." She went on talking, swallowing her words in her tears and sobs. All I caught, all I heard was the drift of the words which came echoing as if from a distant valley. "In the middle of the night Bari's heart-beat grew more rapid and she became weak. No doctor could be found in time so Shiva Raj took her to the hospital and this morning she died . . ."

For one moment, only one moment, it felt as if all motion had stopped. For one moment I could not think at all. My mind was completely empty. As I returned to normal my first thought was that Sakambari no longer existed in this world — a frightening truth, Sakambari's death had come — a hard reality, that inert presence of limitless misery which could not be removed, which no amount of ornaments could decorate, which idealistic sentiments could not conceal. Bari's death was a certainty, a fact.

Feeling dizzy I went toward the wall where the orchids were hanging. Their tender purple flowers were moving in the air. Lighting a cigarette I began to think . . . now I have no problem, now there is no reason for being bold, now there is no restlessness or feeling of suffocation. I have killed Sakambari. In broad daylight I raped Sakambari.

Bari died proving the emotion of my true love

a rape. It is my history. I thought, though the whole world calls this emotion of love a rape, Bari, I am not ready to admit it to myself. The end of this miserable life is death and after that our feelings have no existence. We were unable to see each other clearly and now we never will. After this life there is a great void. Now I wish for nothing since everything is futile. You died suffocating in a darkness and some day I also will die. Here is the value of your life and mine. My Sakambari, one day, full of life, you said that one must have an organ like the killer orchid's. But what have you done with it today? It would have been better for you to believe that you had one and to have killed me. Why couldn't you kill me? How ironic our lives are.

Today your orchid leaves are clinging to my eyes and lips as if to go with me. You lived without meaning. You left me meaningless. Now you are compelling Shiva Raj to kill himself. Sakambari, I want to go around with this message branded on me: life is a failure, life is misfortune, man is miserable whichever way he turns.

A man accustomed to returning with empty heart and mind, I turned away empty. The empty branches of mimosa stood there accepting their emptiness. As if alive a golden-brown head, two fingers yellowed by nicotine passed before me in a haze of smoke. A cartoon-like body displaying its slender neck walked by. With the desire to caress that brown hair, I began to lose my composure completely. Unable to get it back, I went away. I ran through crawling time.

The day is the same, the night is the same, the bar is there and Shiva Raj is there. Shiva Raj did not kill himself. Instead he submitted to the routine of life. He got used to it. Shiva Raj is half the weight he was when we first met. He drinks more. Meaninglessly he tries to escape but he does not feel as if he has escaped. That is, he cannot find a place to escape to.

When love and emotion die in a man, the man survives as nothing more than a machine. This fact Shiva and I both are proving in ourselves. Bari died a useless death and Shiva Raj and I go on living meaningless lives. Now Shiva Raj has a reason to escape but now he is embraced by reality, not relief. As for me, I have digested reality. Now I can trace a path of contentment.

Between me and Shiva Raj the veil has grown thicker but I do not want to remove it because now there is no reason to. Sometimes Shiva Raj begins talking about Bari and says, "Suyogji, listen, today I saw Bari in a dream. For same reason she doesn't seem

dead to me." Then he swallows his drink in one gulp. I still feel in me the helplessness of a dumb animal but now there is no reason to make my life sour trying to define that helplessness. That is, every feeling of mine has now become meaningless. Shiva Raj is doing a good job of ordering his life, but he is not conscious of it. I am conscious. Now I can easily digest the memory of Bari.

Within the glass I see two deep dark eyes. I see a shorn head. I drink and I am content. My own fingers have become yellow with nicotine. I often look at them and I am content. Bari does not exist and I recall that here, love does not exist either. I am living in an absurd world and, I always acknowledge, I am living in a great void.