

BOMBAY

LONDON

NEW YORK

A M I T A V A K U M A R

New York

Routledge

London

ents live. I am able to spend only a few days with them. And then I return to America. It seems to me that I recognize in this letter with a degree of startling intimacy the routine of crumbling resolve, and the course of desires, quite naked and unprotected by guilt. And I want, like Sen, to believe that my parents, old and set in their ways, anxious, and forever bickering, find in each other the strength that their children do not provide. Here, then, is that letter:

Ma, do you remember I had taken you to see a film once? It was Satyajit Ray's The Unvanquished. You had wept a lot. You had said: Apu—the son—why is he so cruel? Why did he have to leave his mother and go to Calcutta to study? He wouldn't visit his mother on vacations even. Instead he tells his friends that he has sent some money to her and "managed her." Then you had turned to me: "Will you behave the same way—like Apu? Then it's going to be exactly like the film—on your return you'll find me no longer—I'll be dead and gone. You won't even see my dead face. . . ." Yesterday, a few of us had gone to the Chicago University Film Club, to see the film again. The Unvanquished. This time I cried. I cried a lot. After returning we had a heated discussion till the early hours of the morning. My friends who would like to settle down here—some have already secured jobs—argued that mothers shouldn't expect so much—shouldn't the sons think of their own future?—mothers shouldn't be selfish and tie their sons to their apron strings, and it's really unfair of them to take revenge by dying. . . . Ma, I don't agree with them. I shall return. Definitely. As soon as I finish my work here. I shan't wait a day longer

The Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore flew in a plane in 1932. He had awoken at three-thirty in the dark morning and was in the air at four. Tagore was traveling in what was then called Persia; at half past eight the plane reached Bushire. "Now comes an age in which man has lifted the burdens of earth into the air," the writer noted in his travel diary. The achievement of flight did not always promise freedom for Tagore. On the contrary, he felt that the airplane was not in harmony with the wind. It roared like an animal in rage. A plane in flight suggested very strongly that human conflict had been raised from the level of the mundane world into the heavenly skies above.

Tagore had been awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913 for his book of poems, *Gitanjali*. The thought that the earth lost its hold on man when he flew into the sky was not the result of poetic fancy. A few paragraphs later in his travelogue, Tagore had supplied the context for his thoughts. "A British air force is stationed at Baghdad," he wrote. "Its Christian chaplain

informs me that they are engaged in bombing operations on some Sheikh villages.”

The fields, ponds, and rivers of his childhood bound Tagore to the earth and its beauty. To fly was to lose this contact with the earth. Only the sense of sight remained for the one who was in the air, and it gave man the disease of aloofness. For Tagore, the man in the plane raining bombs below could not even in good faith ask himself who is kin and who is a stranger: he has put himself in a place from where he is unable to be aware of the difference and to judge accordingly. “The men, women and children done to death there,” wrote Tagore, “meet their fate by a decree from the stratosphere of British imperialism — which finds it easy to shower death because of its distance from its individual victims.” At the same time, the invention of the airplane impressed Tagore. He saw in the race of the inventors qualities of character like perseverance and courage. The sight of his four Dutch pilots (“immensely built, the personification of energy . . . their rude, overflowing health, bequeathed by generations brought up on nourishing food”) evoked admiration and the thought that his own compatriots had been deprived of food and exhausted by toil.

This picture has now changed. The descendants of those who were, in Tagore’s time, the subject peoples have now for long been flying planes. They also travel in planes. This situation also incites ambivalence. The travelers are often workers migrating long distances in search of work. In fact, such travel remains a part of the fantasy in the minds of the poor. There are many in the poorer countries of the world for whom the plane in flight represents the journey that, when undertaken in the future, will take them to the promised land. In airports all over the world, one can see the migrant workers from countries like Tagore’s India, waiting to be taken to another place to work.

On the morning of September 11 last year, nineteen men, in their appearance not different at all from the others who stand in the visa lines outside the embassies and consulates of rich nations in cities like Calcutta and Cairo, Karachi and Khartoum, hijacked four American jets filled with fuel and people. The suicidal acts of the hijackers also gave a perverse twist to the old story of the difficult travel to the land of plenty and promise. According to reports that were published in the days following the attacks, it was revealed that the hijackers believed that their deaths promised them entry into the garden of heaven and the ministrations of seventy virgins. We can persist with Tagore’s vision of the fiery bird raining death, but his universe is already lost, the simple oppositions between the earth and the sky rendered obsolete. Those who had been chained to the earth have also learned to claw their way into the air and wreak havoc from on high. There are new stories of travel, and now terror touches all.

Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* opens with an explosion in the air. A jet is blown apart while in flight, and two actors tumble out, “like titbits of tobacco from a broken old cigar.” The two men, Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, were passengers in the jumbo jet *Bostan*, Flight AI-420. In the night air around them “floated the debris of the soul, broken memories, sloughed-off selves, severed mother-tongues, violated privacies, untranslatable jokes, extinguished futures, lost loves, the forgotten meaning of hollow, booming words, *land, belonging, home*.” Rushdie’s fictional midair explosion was based on an actual event. On June 28, 1985, Flight AI-182 burst into flames off the coast of Ireland. The plane had taken off from Toronto and Montreal; it was headed for New Delhi and Bombay via London. All 331 people on board were killed. The plane’s destruction was widely believed to be the work of Sikh extremists

who wanted to avenge the Indian army's assault on the Holy Temple in Amritsar. Two Indo-Canadian Sikhs were arrested by the police and charged with first-degree murder. Flight AI-182 had indeed been packed with migrants. Rushdie's catalog of the debris from the destroyed airliner furnishes a valuable, and touching, inventory of the baggage—the load of everyday experience—that immigrants carry with them. And the play of magic realism allows the writer to introduce, amid the destruction, the miracle of rebirth. Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha survive death, and are transformed. This is an allegory of migration. Loss renews life. As Gibreel Farishta croons, even as he falls from 29,002 feet, "To be born again, first you have to die."

The sweet dream of reinvention is a radical one, but reality turns out to be more intractable. Rushdie's story of the passenger floating down to a part of London is not nearly as surprising as the actual, unheralded fall from the sky of a secret passenger at the edge of the same city. According to a July 2001 report in the *Guardian*, a body was discovered in a parking lot of a department store in west London. A workman in nearby Heathrow airport had seen a figure in jeans and a black T-shirt suddenly "plummeting from the sky like a stone." Where was the home of this dead man who was lying in a pool formed from his own split brains? The report said that the man who had fallen to earth was Mohammed Ayaz, a twenty-one-year-old stowaway who had made a desperate attempt to escape the harsh life of a peasant in his village in Pakistan on the Afghan border. The previous night, when a British Airways jet turned around to begin taxing at Bahrain airport in preparation for takeoff, Ayaz had apparently sprinted through the dark and climbed into the huge chambers above the wheels of the Boeing. It could not have been an easy task to find one's way into the wheel bay. The report said: "It involves climbing 14 ft up one of the aircraft's 12

enormous wheels, then finding somewhere to crouch or cling as the plane makes its way to the end of the runway and starts its deafening engines." At that point, the plane would have accelerated to 180 mph.

Ayaz would not have known this, though one cannot be sure, but the undercarriage compartment "has no oxygen, no heating and no pressure." Within minutes, the temperature around Ayaz would have dropped below freezing. The report that I have been quoting had furnished, at this point, its own sense of journalistic pathos: "At 18,000 ft, minutes later, while passengers only a few feet away were being served gin and tonic and settling down to watch in-flight movies, Ayaz would have begun to hallucinate from lack of oxygen." The report had then added plainly: "At 30,000 ft the temperature is minus 56 degrees." When, many hours later, the plane was still a few miles away from Heathrow, the captain would have lowered the wheels of the aircraft. It was at that time, when the plane was likely to have been between 2,000 and 3,000 feet, that Mohammed Ayaz's lifeless body must have been delivered into the morning air.

For seven months prior to his death, Ayaz had been working as a laborer in Dubai. His family is poor, finding a meager livelihood from farming wheat, barley, corn, and onions. The agent who had secured a way for Ayaz to go to the Gulf had demanded money in addition to the cost of travel and visa. The family had had to borrow heavily. The money that Ayaz was going to earn would allow him to repay the debts in two years. But things didn't turn out the way Ayaz had expected. In Dubai, Ayaz's employer took away his passport. The salary he received was less than one-fourth of what the agent had promised. Ayaz was able to make barely enough to buy food. Ayaz did not tell his family of his plan to cross into Bahrain or his attempt to make his way

to England. Ayaz's brother, Gul Bihar, told the reporter: "He always spoke about going to work in America or England. But they don't give visas to poor people like us."

The report in the *Guardian* had been sent to me in the mail by a friend. I was standing outside my house when the mailman brought the letter one morning, and I read the newspaper clipping while standing on my steps. As I began reading the first few paragraphs, I thought of the opening lines from Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* quoted above. Those lines were what first came to mind. But in seconds, the mood had slipped. The pain and despair that surrounded me as I read the report took me away from the pages of celebrated fiction. In much that I have written in the past few years, I have tried to understand how Indian writing has populated the literary landscape familiar to Western readers with people who look and speak differently and who have their histories in another part of the world. The presentation of this record by Indian writers has been a great, imaginative achievement. But a dead stowaway? So much that appears in Indian fiction today, particularly in its magical realist versions, appears banal if not also meretricious, when compared to the fragmentary account that emerges from a news story of a poor youth's struggle to cross the borders that divide the rich from the poor. The textbook of "multicultural literature" carries no words of testimony of a young man narrating what flashed through his head as he went running in the dark behind a giant airplane that was about to pick up speed on the runway. It suddenly strikes me that Mohammed Ayaz could not have foreseen his death—and that seems to me to be more and more a triumph of his imagination.

The article in the *Guardian* also said that Ayaz was not the first to fall down from the sky. In October 1996, the body of a nineteen-year-old from Delhi, Vijay Saini, had dropped out of

a plane at almost the same spot. Saini's corpse lay undiscovered for three days. (Vijay Saini's brother, Pradeep, according to the report, is the only person believed to have survived such a journey. The article said that the man was found at Heathrow "in a disorientated state shortly after a flight from Delhi landed.") Then, two years later, a couple drinking in a pub in nearby Marlborough had seen another man tumble out of the sky. That body was never discovered. The police believe that it might have fallen in a reservoir. "The undercarriage is always lowered at the same point, that is why they are falling at the same place," an official told the *Guardian*. "But it's an almost uncanny coincidence—these people fly right across the world in this way from different places, and they all end up in a car park in Richmond. If there are any more bodies to fall, that's where they will fall." The West rushes up to meet the migrant, not as the promised land but, instead, a parking lot that becomes for him a desolate, temporary graveyard.

On September 11, bodies fell from the top floors of the north tower of the World Trade Center. One writer, watching from the street below, wrote "it looked like a desperate ballet: some seemed to be flying, their arms sweeping gracefully as they picked up speed. Others tumbled and some just dropped, rigid, all the way down." As I reflect on that ghastly scene, months after it occurred, I find myself mentally moving Mohammed Ayaz from a parking lot in west London to the Twin Towers. He could have been one among the many migrant workers, dishwashers, messengers, cleaners, and restaurant help who perished on that day. But it doesn't work. I see him again and again in the wheel bay of the airplane. That thought won't go away. I also realize that I am perturbed by the thought that the hijackings and the mayhem that followed should erase from public consciousness the presence of the other illegal passenger, the

humble stowaway, and stretching behind him, the memory of a whole history of dispossession. The sad truth is that the stowaway is not alone. Hidden behind that figure are the untold millions in countries like India or Pakistan who dream of a different future. Often, these young men and women have been turned into migrants in their own land because of poverty, or famines, or wars waged by others in the fields where their families have toiled for generations. How removed is the pathos of the stowaway from the rage of the hijacker?

The body falling out of the sky is the other and silent half of the story of international travel and tourism. We are reminded that not everyone crosses borders alive, despite the cheerful acceptance of globalization by many governments of the world. Standing near his son's unmarked grave, a mound of brown earth ringed by stones and covered with a plastic sheet, Mohammed Ayaz's father said, "My son was as strong as four men but he died in search of bread."

I can try to imagine the dreams that come to the stowaway when he begins to drift into sleep despite the cold and the noise in his shuddering cage. But these would be speculations. The stowaway will not share his secrets with the writer. It is impossible for me to know if the stowaway is nostalgic for the fields in his village and the familiar sunshine on the wall of his house. He had wanted to leave them behind. The plane is carrying him into the future. He tells himself that he can bear hunger for a long time. He is a quick learner. Once he has his feet on the ground he will find a way to earn money soon. These are the thoughts that I surround the stowaway with, as if he were, in reality, trapped inside the darkness in my head. It is because I am telling myself over and over that he does not feel any pain. He feels light-headed. He is not fleeing anything anymore. He is flying.

Flight

EPILOGUE:

INDIAN

RESTAURANT

Shastriji was my neighbor. His apartment was on Westcott. I live on Forster Avenue, and Westcott is the next street on the way to the university. I think Shastriji came here in 1984, but I cannot be sure. When I met Shastriji six months ago, I liked going to his apartment. It was like visiting a friend's house in Bihar. He always asked me if I'd like to have tea, but I never came away without eating dinner.

Our first meeting was in the library. I was sitting in the periodicals section. I had seen him looking at me. He was a middle-aged man, slightly heavy, wearing a blue denim shirt tucked into his khaki pants. With his good clothes and small paunch, he looked respectable. I had never seen him before. When I saw him walking toward me, I knew he wanted the *Outlook* I was reading. He came and stood near me.

When I looked up, he smiled sheepishly. He didn't ask me to give him the magazine. He only said: "Excuse me, is it the latest one?"