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Janice Pariat, "19/87"

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Creative Contribution

Janice Pariat

19/87

Author's Introduction

In 1987, Shillong, the small hill-station town that I come from in the far northeast of India, played backdrop to swift and violent 'ethnic' conflicts between the local Khasis and 'dkhars' (the Khasi word for 'outsider'). The designation 'dkhar' implies the drawing of borders of purity in terms of bloodline and lineage. This fiction piece is about the relationship between two unlikely friends—Suleiman, a Muslim tailor fond of flying kites and Banri, a Khasi youth with a penchant for betting. The story gives voice to alternative conceptions of belonging and being indigenous to a place, and to the peripheral expressions of the awkwardness of purity.

19/87

Kite warriors wage a faceless war. In the city, on rooftops and terraces and small open car parks, the enemy is hidden, concealed at the other end of the string, probing the sky with slim, curving weapons. Hardened troopers like Suleiman, however, come to know their rivals well, their style of play and combat, even though they wouldn't recognize them on the streets of Shillong. Amid the carousing flutter of kites during the season, usually deployed by kids after school, there were a few to watch out for, the ones that swirled and snuck around, their string dipped in shards of powdered glass. Most of the expert fighters flew small, insidious, single line kites. They were all good at the 'pull' — when a kite is flown ahead of the others and then tugged quickly, cutting all the lines in its path. Suleiman preferred to fly a larger kite, one with a pastiche of tissue paper that he pasted together with great care. When he was a boy, he would hold the spool for his father, learning to release just the right amount of line. Later their roles were reversed. And now, well, he hadn't flown many kites since his father died three years ago. The last few evenings, though, Suleiman had noticed a new rival in the neighbourhood. Someone who flew a kite as large as his, and who seemed, Suleiman admitted grudgingly, to be almost as good. This afternoon, he looked repeatedly out of the window, past the guava tree, beyond the line of low tin roofs, at the sky. There were more kites than usual this August, perhaps because of all the trouble in town. Weeks of curfew forced everyone to stay home, and there wasn't much to do on these long autumn evenings. At least a kite was free to travel, over electric wires and telephone cables and treetops.

From his window, he could see the path that wound through the courtyard, leading on one end to the main road and the other to the cluster of houses behind his, accessible only by a flight of steep stone steps. He thought that was where the young man was headed, the one who swaggered by, wearing a red chequered shirt and light denim jeans. Instead, a knocking sounded on the door, sharp and persistent. Suleiman looked up from his sewing.

'Who is it?'

There was no answer. The knocking didn't stop. He pushed himself away from the sewing machine. It was best to open the door. After he undid the latch, the young man walked in without invitation.

‘Hey, tailor, mend this.’ He thrust a black leather jacket into Suleiman’s arms.

Across the elbow was a jagged rip.

‘Can you do it quickly?’

The young man cast a glance at the mirror on the wall, and then around the room. Suleiman saw him take in the small kitchen space in the corner, the tailored shirts and dresses, the large ironing table, and finally the rihal holding the Holy Book and the rolled-up prayer mat. The tailor retreated to his workstation, where he fumbled with needle and thread. The young man stood by the door and lit a cigarette; the smell of cheap tobacco quickly filled the room.

‘How long will you take? I have to go to work.’

‘Five minutes.’

Suleiman sewed quickly and carefully. The garment in his hands carried the faint odor of old sweat and tobacco; the leather was faded yet tough. When he finished, he made a neat knot and snapped the thread.

‘How much?’ asked the young man.

‘Five rupees.’

‘I’ll give you three, okay...’ He placed the coins on the table and snatched up the jacket. Standing in front of the mirror, the young man continued talking. ‘I just lost first round at thoh teem... I can’t afford to pay you so much.’ He was referring to the numbers that the gambling houses released in the morning. It was a lottery of sorts, calculated by an archery game held in an open field; there was another one in the afternoon to determine the ‘second round’ numbers in the evening. The young man settled his hair and then held up his elbow. The mended rip was barely visible. His tone became friendlier. ‘Are you a betting man, tailor?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘Me too...almost got the second round last week...I bet three and four came. Keep missing it by a few...’ He listed various gambling exploits. Evidently, it was something he enjoyed, even if he wasn’t very lucky.

‘I won both rounds a few years ago,’ said Suleiman. ‘Clean sweep.’

The young man stared, his eyes wide in disbelief. ‘How did you manage that?’

The tailor smiled. ‘It came to me in a dream.’

‘Aah...I’ve heard about that...calculating numbers from dreams. My granny used to do it...I should have asked her. She’s dead now. Never understood how it’s done.’ He glanced at Suleiman, and added, ‘Do you...know?’

‘Which number came up this morning?’ asked Suleiman.

‘Two.’

‘You can try eight, for the second round.’

The young man laughed. ‘How do you know? You’re a tailor.’

With that, he left the room, slamming the door behind him. Suleiman put away the scissors. He’d rather not have them lying around.

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In the Mawkhar neighbourhood, thoh teem shops sprouted in tiny nooks and crevices, in side rooms and makeshift tin stalls and spaces under stairs. The warren of alleyways in Iew Duh market spilled into Mawkhar, and its streets were packed with small local shops. Bakeries sold Khasi sweets on white melamine counters—piles of long, twisted deep fried dough coated in sugar, warm, sticky slabs of rice putharo, and deep bowls of lal mohan swimming in syrup. There were shops that sold clothes and wool by the kilo, while some were lined with shelves of cheap, fake leather shoes. Further away from this, after the spread of residential houses, along the road leading out of town, began the rows of car workshops, each with their own graveyard of abandoned parts and automobiles. Somewhere in the middle, no less grimy and greasy than the others, was Bah Heh’s workshop where Banri worked.

A group of young men walked in through the gate. Banri recognized some faces. They went up to Bah Heh and instructed him, politely and firmly, to keep the workshop shut the next day.

‘For the rally,’ said the one who was evidently the leader of the pack. He had a smooth, clean-shaven head and face. ‘We hope all of you will be attending? Yes? Good. Good. We need our youth to support us. After all, this is for your future benefit only.’ His eyes glinted, as he looked them over; they rested on Banri who was wiping his greasy hands on an even greasier rag. ‘This rally will be big; the government must listen to us this time. Remember,’ he

ended with practised ease, 'it all depends on your support.' They trooped out like a small, determined army, and headed to the next workshop. Don disappeared beneath the stout, rounded frame of an Ambassador car, Khraw continued tinkering with the engine. Banri wet a sponge and soaped the vehicle. Something in the air had changed, it hung clenched and heavy above them, tight as a fist. There was no teasing and chatter, the workshop was quiet. They worked without saying a word. Bah Heh strummed a guitar for a while and then put it away.

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'Come on, we must celebrate.'

'I don't feel like drinking.'

'Nonsense.'

'No, really...'

'Just a little, no harm.' Banri was brazenly cheerful. Suleiman detected the faint odour of alcohol on his breath; this wasn't his first drink of the evening. His uninvited guest plucked two tumblers from the shelf and turned on the radio. It crackled to life with the local news:

'...the shoot-out at Laban last week. There have been minor cases of unrest throughout the town, and encounters between the KSU and CRPF continue. Bah Lyngdoh, the Superintendent of Police, says security will be tight, especially with the KSU rally planned for tomorrow...'

'Let's find some music,' said Banri. He fiddled with the tuner, but failed to coax out anything more tuneful than static and fragments of the news.

'I'll do it,' said the tailor. 'You pour the drinks.'

'That's an old radio.' Banri measured out generous amounts of dark rum.

'It belonged to my father.' He turned the tuner gently, and finally, it caught a station playing old Bollywood songs. 'He brought it with him when we came to Shillong in '55.'

'From where did you come?'

'Lucknow...in Uttar Pradesh. You know where that is?'

'Yes, of course. Near Bihar. Now drink.' Banri slugged his alcohol like most other hardened drinkers in town. A few quick, neat gulps.

Suleiman followed, slower.

‘You came so long ago...why didn’t you go back?’

‘My father didn’t want to. He said our old hometown was filled with sad memories, and this was a fresh, new start.’ He took a sip. ‘My mother died when I was born.’

‘Sorry to hear that.’

Suleiman shrugged. ‘I didn’t know her at all. I didn’t even miss her.’

‘You’ve been around here longer than me.’ Banri poured himself a refill.

‘That might be true but it makes no difference; people still throw stones at my house.’ Suleiman gulped his drink. His eyes were slightly glazed. ‘They call me all sorts of names... bastard outsider.’

‘Don’t worry, they throw stones at me too, tailor.’

‘No, they don’t, you lie,’ he said with sudden vehemence. ‘Only at mine and others like me.’

‘What I meant was... Here, calm down. I’m sorry...’

The candle spluttered and crackled, it was beginning to burn low. Banri handed the tailor a replenished tumbler. ‘Tell me about your father.’

‘He was a radio operator with All India Radio; he worked for them most of his life.’

‘And now...?’

‘He passed away three years ago. In a way I’m thankful... before this trouble got bad.’

Banri swirled his glass, watching the alcohol catch the candlelight. ‘I never knew my father. He died when I was three. Too much drinking.’

‘You shouldn’t be drinking so much then.’

‘What else to do in this god-awful town?’ He knocked back his rum. ‘Especially if you have no woman around. How come you live alone, tailor?’

Suleiman muttered something about not having found the right person.

‘Right person, wrong person...who knows until you try.’

‘Maybe you’re right,’ said Suleiman, and then added that, anyway, he probably wouldn’t be in Shillong for much longer.

‘Even I want to get out, sometimes, you know, see a bit of other places.’ Banri hesitated. ‘Earlier today these KSU guys came to the workshop, to tell us about the rally, and he was talking about the future. You know, how they

needed our support and it all depended on us...all the stuff I've heard before many times. I wonder, is the future built on these things?'

Suleiman remained silent, an unlit cigarette in his hand.

'People keep asking me why I don't join KSU...that it's a cause for our tribe. They think...I see it in their eyes when they look at me...they think if I don't then somehow I'm not a real Khasi, you know? I mean I see their point and all—we don't own any businesses here, or hold important government positions...but I don't know,'—he struggled with his words—'if this is the right way...fighting, beh dkhar...chasing outsiders out of Shillong.' He pointed his glass at Suleiman. 'Where will you go? Anyway, even if I join them who will look after my mother and my sisters? With my dad gone...we're on our own, you know.' He laughed. 'Maybe I'll go where you go, tailor.'

The tailor struck a match and lit his cigarette. 'That's the problem. I don't really have anywhere to go. I was two when we came to Shillong. I thought it was the most beautiful place on earth.'

The night settled around them in a shadowy haze; it was quiet now with few shouts in the street, and no patter of running feet. No stones pelted at Suleiman's roof either. Perhaps for now the trouble had moved elsewhere. If anyone were taking a walk, they'd catch the smell of coal fires, and draw their shawls around them closer, for it was always cold in the hills. They'd pass darkened windows where candlelight bled around the edges, and the faces inside might be wary and fearful, not holding a glance, wondering why there was someone outside at this hour. In some rooms children may be listening to grandparents telling stories of a time that was simpler and kinder. From one house might come the sound of raucous, drunken laughter, drowning the music from an old radio. Yet this was not the occasion to be curious, it was safer to move on.

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It was a cool, clear evening; the wind was just right—neither strong nor slack—and Suleiman's kite barely lifted off the ground. He tried repeatedly, but it was difficult to keep the line steady whilst releasing the spool.

He remembered something his father had once told him, that the kite held the soul of the person who flew it. ‘What does that mean, abba?’ he’d asked, and his father had replied, ‘What you feel flows through the string.’

‘Bah...’ said Suleiman in disgust as the line dropped yet again. The air was hazy with the smoke of evening fires, and a light mist rolled down the hills in the distance. From his vantage point on the roof, he could see the town spread out before him, with its red tin-roofed buildings, dark pine treetops and tangles of wires and kite strings stitching the sky. On another afternoon, he would have headed to the gentle open spaces of the golf course, and walked along the edges of the forest until he felt soothed and better. Now, though, he was confined to this square piece of ground while kites prowled above him like birds of prey. He’d give it one last try, he thought. And this time, helped by a nifty breeze, the kite lifted. Soon, it was swooping through the air like a delighted bird. He laughed. Perhaps this is what his father had meant—that the kite mimicked his gladness. It flew higher, leaving the rest behind. Some of the smaller kites challenged him to a duel, but the battles didn’t last more than a few minutes. He was invincible. Finally, a large kite rose in the air and swirled around his.

‘Here’s the bastard,’ muttered Suleiman. At first he allowed his kite to be trailed, followed like prey; they swayed in the sky, their lines crossing but not breaking. He waited for the fighter to get impatient, make a mistake, move too soon. But he didn’t. He was as careful as Suleiman. Soon, in turn, his kite was the stalker, the string strained against his hands as he tried to steady the line. And then for a moment the kites were so still they seemed to have stopped moving, the clouds behind them ringed with the dying edges of sunlight. It continued for a while, this mid-air game, blown in the wind. Suleiman didn’t know how much longer he’d be able to keep it up. All at once, though, and, with some luck, he pulled and a line snapped, the other kite dropped, floating lower and lower until it disappeared into a cluster of treetops. Suleiman managed to hold the line steady long enough to bring the kite down. It lay in his hands, fluttering like a breathless bird. Around him, the town looked coy and peaceful, hiding behind long shadows, a few lights flickering on the hills.

From the courtyard down below came the sound of running footsteps.

It was Banri.

‘Hey,’ he shouted into the tailor’s empty room.

‘I’m here.’

Banri looked up, his face round and bright as a newly minted coin.

‘I won! Clean sweep! Both rounds.’

Suleiman smiled.

‘What are you doing on the roof?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Let’s go drink. My treat...’

‘Allah! No, I told you, never again...’

‘Okay, we’ll go eat. There’s a good Muslim restaurant in Mawlong Haat.’

‘Near the market?’

‘Yes.’

‘But...’ He stopped himself from reminding Banri about the rally. Surely, by now it must be over. How long could it go on? And this evening, for some reason, he felt as though the town was his own.

‘Alright, let’s go.’

He was ready, even in the smallest possible way, to reclaim it.

A Note on the Text

These extracts are from a longer work ‘19/87’, which originally appeared in *Boats on Land: A Collection of Stories* (Janice Pariat, 2012), published here in a new format with the author’s permission.