

Dear Raghavendra,

You have been uncharacteristically kind to Ms. Desai's prose; and I notice that Rushdie has pronounced her "a terrific writer". So I simply must try to catch your poetess nodding; and I hope you will indulge me as I set about doing so. I am going to point, simply, and, as much as I can, let the text itself do the talking. The pair of numbers accompanying each 'bullet' below specify page and line; quoted text is all in boldface (except for the "National Geographic" just below and a single italicized "Nothing!" some way on).

- 1;1: **All day, the colors had been those of dusk, mist moving like a water creature across the great flanks of mountains possessed of ocean shadows and depths. Briefly visible above the vapour, Kanchenjunga was a far peak whittled out of ice, gathering the last of the light, a plume of snow blown high by storms at its summit.**

Sai, sitting on the verandah, was reading an article about giant squid in the *National Geographic*. Every now and then she looked up at Kanchenjunga, observed its wizard phosphorescence with a shiver.

- How something **briefly visible** can be **observed every now and then** is a bit of a mystery to me. Going back, do we have
- **a far peak whittled out of ice** which is **a plume of snow** as well ? Or are we to picture here
- **a far peak whittled out of ice, gathering the last of the light** even as **a plume of snow [is] blown high by storms [about] its summit** ?

- 18;28: **The police had exposed the cook's poverty, the fact that he was not looked after, that his dignity had no basis; they ruined the facade and threw it in his face.**

Then policemen and their umbrellas — mostly black, one pink with flowers — retreated through the tangle of nightshade.

- Strangely remorseful policemen these, who *retreat* after 'ruining the facade' of a man's dignity and throwing it in his face. The umbrellas and the nightshade complicate matters somewhat though: given how these motifs were introduced, farce or irony of some sort might be what "retreated" was meant to bring on here. The policemen had **left their opened umbrellas in a row in the verandah** when they got to mouldering 'manse' which houses our heroine Sai; **but the wind undid them and they began to wheel about — mostly black ones that leaked a black dye, but also a pink, synthetic made-in-Taiwan one, abloom with flowers.** Concluding their business there, and accompanied by these wilful umbrellas, the policemen had commenced their dealings with the cook respectfully enough: on account of the mated black cobras whose familiar, almost, the cook is made out to be (12;34 – 13;23). Their respect, however, had **collapsed instantly when they arrived at the cook's hut buried under a ferocious tangle of nightshade. Here they felt comfortable unleashing their scorn, and they overturned his narrow bed, left his few belongings in a heap.**

Very odd creatures, again, Ms. Desai's policemen: needing to feel 'comfortable' while 'unleashing' their scorn. Anyhow, their umbrellas are tame enough at the end; and they are made to retreat through a tangle of nightshade whose "ferocity" had not at all impeded their advance on the unfortunate cook.

- 23;8: **Biju felt he was entering a warm, amniotic bath.**
 - This is our cook's son, feeling his way through the underside of immigrant America: he seems to have fitted a writing course in — pardon that split verb — between flipping hamburgers and patting out phulkas.

- 27;18: **Moscow was not part of the convent curriculum. Sai imagined a sullen bulky architecture, heavysset, solid-muscled, bulldog-jowled, in Soviet shades of gray, under gray Soviet skies, all around gray Soviet peoples eating gray Soviet foods. A masculine city, without frill or weakness, without crenellation, without a risky angle. An uncontrollable spill of scarlet now in this scene, unspooling.**

- Thus our heroine — a child immured in a Dehra Dun convent now — imagining the Moscow where her parents are: into which the news of their death under a bus 'spills as scarlet' (contriving to unspool, as well, even as it spills.) With no prompting at all from either books or teachers, apparently, our wonderchild has managed to conjure such a Moscow as her maker might have.

Sai could have come to picture Moscow making do without 'crenellation' and 'risky angles' from her mother's letters: one of which is reproduced just after the news of her scarlet passing. The epistolary exertions of that personage seem to have proceeded heedless of all things gray and Soviet, however, hindered neither by place nor tense: **Dear Sai, she had written, well, another winter coming up and we have brought out the heavy woolens. Met Mr. and Mrs. Sharma for bridge and your papa cheated as usual. We enjoy eating herring, a pungent fish you must sample one day.**

- 55;21: **He had found that there was nothing so awful as being in the service of a family you couldn't be proud of, that let you down, showed you up, made you into a fool. How the other cooks and maids, watchmen and gardeners on the hillside laughed, boasting meanwhile how well they were treated by their employers — money, comfort, even pensions in special bank accounts. In fact, so beloved were some of these servants that they were actually begged not to work; their employers pleaded with them to eat cream and ghee, to look after their chilblains and sun themselves like monitor lizards on winter afternoons. The MetalBox watchman assured him that each morning he consumed a fried egg — with white toast, when white bread had been fashionable, and now that brown bread was most in vogue, with brown.**

◦ I tried to picture, without success, the gentlefolk of Kalimpong settling their meiny down to the glossy pages of *National Geographic* and — sudden tantriks — miming for them the postures of antediluvian reptiles.

• 61;35: **After lunch, the judge sat at his desk under a tree to try cases, usually in a cross mood, for he disliked the informality, hated the splotch of leaf shadow on him imparting an untidy mongrel look.**

◦ A singularly fastidious custodian of justice this: who merely dislikes informality but *hates* the ‘splotch of leaf shadow’ that ‘imparts’ to his own person — in the eyes of his rustic petitioners, presumably — an untidy mongrel look. The decaying pensioner who inherits Sai after her parents’ death is being described here, in his days as a country judge: before his apotheosis in **the high court of Lucknow where, annoyed by lawless pigeons shuttlecocking about those tall shadowy halls, he would preside, white powdered wig over white powdered face, hammer in hand.** But before his person could emanate this apparition our judge had to endure much: besides the provocations of ‘leaf shadow’ and the irritant of ‘informality’

• 62;2: **there was a worse aspect of contamination and corruption: he heard cases in Hindi, but they were recorded in Urdu by the stenographer and translated by the judge into a second record in English, although his command of Hindi and Urdu was tenuous; the witnesses who couldn’t read at all put their thumbprints at the bottom of “Read Over And Acknowledged Correct”, as instructed. Nobody could be sure how much of the truth had fallen between languages, between languages and illiteracy; the clarity that justice demanded was nonexistent. Still, despite the leaf shadow and the language confusion, he acquired a fearsome reputation for his speech that seemed to belong to no language at all, and for his face like a mask that conveyed something beyond human fallibility.**

◦ Some unusually curved moral universe our judge and his petitioners must inhabit here: if ‘leaf shadow’ and ‘language confusion’ could equally mask the thwarting of justice. Anyhow, his daily tribulations done with, somewhere beyond fallibility our Solomon **embarks** on tea that **had to be perfect and drop scones made in the frying pan**, with **forehead wrinkled, as if angrily mulling something important: until his stern work face would hatch an expression of tranquility.** And soothed thus, postprandially free of leaf shadow and worse, here he goes, setting

• 62;25: **out into the countryside with his fishing rod or gun. The countryside was full of game; lariats of migratory birds lassoed the sky in October, quail and partridge with lines of babies strung out behind whirred by like nursery toys that emit sound with movement; pheasant — fat foolish creatures, made to be shot — went scurrying through the bushes. The thunder of gunshot rolled away, the leaves shivered, and he experienced the profound silence that could come**

only after violence. One thing was always missing, though, the proof of the pudding, the prize of the action, the manliness in manhood, the partridge for the pot, because he returned with —

Nothing!

He was a terrible shot.

- Maskless, our embodiment of justice endures such ‘profundity’ sans pudding not once or twice, but — *everyday!*
- Stepping back a bit, I suppose the judge is meant to cut a ridiculous figure: an inept ‘brown sahib’. But he would be a probable *fiction* only in farce: and, as freighted with ‘empathy’ as she is, Ms. Desai cannot manage farce. The judge is a poor fiction here because, with all that earnestly ‘evocative’ writing ladled around him, one cannot gauge how ludicrous he is *to the narrator*.
- I would dearly like, incidentally, to see a nursery toy that can ‘whir by’ and *not* ‘emit sound with movement’.

• 79;27: **By 6 a.m the bakery shelves were stocked with rye, oatmeal and peasant bread, apricot and raspberry biscuits that broke open to a flood of lush amber or ruby jam. One such morning, Biju sat outside in a pale patch of sun, with a roll. He cracked the carapace of the crust and began to eat, plucking the tender fleece with his long thin fingers —**

But in New York innocence never prevails: an ambulance passed, the NYPD, a fire engine; the subway went overhead and the jolting rhythm traveled up through his defenseless shoes; it shook his heart and sullied the roll.

- That roll ‘fleecy’ beneath its ‘carapace’, and its biscuit cousins loaded with ‘lush’ amber and ruby, seem to be the most ‘innocent’ things about. Biju would have to be a child or an idiot for the sirens of passing ambulances or the jolting of trains to ‘shake his heart’ and *thereby* overcome his innocence; and that sort of thing, should it happen at all, would happen wherever there are ambulances and trains, not just in New York.

• 105;10 – 105;33: **Then, in a flash, it was upon them. An anxious sound came from the banana trees as they began to flap their great ears, for they were always the first to sound the alarm. The masts of bamboo were flung together and rang with the sound of an ancient martial art.**

In the kitchen, the cook’s calendar of gods began to kick on the wall as if it were alive, a plethora of arms, legs, demonic heads, blazing eyes. The cook clamped everything shut, doors and windows, but then Sai opened the door just as he was sifting the flour to get rid of the weevils, and up the flour gusted and covered them both ...

a dose of ‘comedy’ follows; and then the kitchen door

shut itself along with all the doors in the house. Bang bang bang. The sky gaped, lit by flame; blue fire ensnared the pine tree that

sizzled to an instant death leaving a charcoal stump, a singed smell, a crosshatch of branches over the lawn. An unending rain broke on them and Mutt turned into a primitive life form, an amoebic creature, slithering about the floor.

◦ Last things first: to whom would rain announce itself as *unending* even as it breaks? Maybe we are meant read “a rain that would never end broke on them” here; but going on immediately to the dog would be only silly then.

◦ First things then: the ‘it’ that ‘came upon them in a flash’ is not named. But, now that **it** is upon them, surely the bananas are a little late sounding their first alarm? and just what does that “**for**” explain?

As for that possessed calendar: one had better look away.

More seriously, though some monstrous **it** has just come ‘in a flash’ on them, Sai and the cook have time enough to get dusted in flour and laugh at each other whited “*Angrez ke tarah*”, before all the doors go **bang bang bang** and the sky ‘gapes’: I spared you that bit of burlesque just now.

Coming back to Mutt, that **dog more human than dog** who solaces our judge in his purgatory: closed out with her slithering, the tremendous advent of this **it** seems to have worked, most of all, to make an amoeba of her. Unintended comedy that, one might think; but reading on a little we find

• 106;9: **She tried to smile, but her tail kept folding under and her eyes were those of a soldier in war, finished with caring for silly myths of courage. Her ears strained beyond the horizon, anticipating what didn’t fail to arrive, yet another wave of bombardment, the sound of civilization crumbling — she had never known it was so big — cities and monuments fell — and she fled again.**

◦ Thus the apocalypse of Mutt, who had mistaken the ‘size’ of civilization, thundering around her as that ‘unending rain’ breaks.

• 142;25: ... **the spindly soldier was killed in Burma, shakily defending the British against the Japanese. His brother was offered a job and this boy died, too, in Italy, outside Florence, not fighting at all, but making jam from apricots for the major of a battalion in a villa housing British troops. Six lemons, he had been instructed, and four cups of sugar. He stirred the pot in the unthreatening Italian countryside, pheasants whirring over the olives and the vines, the resistance army unearthing truffles in the woods. It was a particularly bountiful spring, and then, they were bombed—**

◦ A sufficient example of Ms. Desai’s syntax that “and then” between “bountiful spring” and “bombed”.

◦ Having an army of resistance fighters go for truffles, with each guerilla leading a happy pig no doubt, is a nice touch here: if that is the picture Ms. Desai means to conjure. But someone should have told her that the phrases “the resistance army” and “an army of resistance fighters” name very different conformations of men and *materiel*. Having an army unearth *truffles* could be comic hyperbole, of course; but the pheasants would have to do rather more

than whirr over olives and vines, then, to keep things in the air. The ‘empathy’ disposed generously around is just too much ballast, anyway, for comedy.

I’ve tired of the game, though I’m sure there’s a deal left to point at: and I am going to hazard some quick conclusions now.

◦ Ms. Desai’s writing pulls us along by making us ‘picturize’ whatever she describes. But we do so serially, as it were: no discernible ‘montage’ develops, and we endure bare successions of incident — narrative degree zero — distracted by a continual ‘detailing’ that goes its own way. Consider, for instance, the monitor lizards whom the ‘beloved’ among the servants of Kalimpong are apparently invited to emulate on winter afternoons, having been fed cream and ghee. However one parses these lizards — bringing them on otherwise, somehow, than as a peculiar interest of the very Christian masters of these fortunate domestics — the picture they afford is an ‘add on’ merely: these lizards do not at all inflect, in their vicinity, the simple momentum of the narrative.

◦ The writing aims at ‘empathetic evocation’ one might say. But Ms. Desai is not literate enough to evoke with effect: and making the reader picturize serially accomplishes very little. The comic disproportion of “an army unearthing truffles”, for instance, is not a visible thing at all: our ability to picture does its ancillary work in some oblique way here.

◦ But these technical failings are negligible, really, beside the singular moral sensibility displayed by Ms. Desai’s way with words like “innocence” and “violence”: consider the judge who is made to experience *day after day* ‘the profound silence that could come only after violence’, even though, ‘terrible shot’ that he is, he *never* manages to hit anything he shoots at. To call Ms. Desai puerile would do children down. One needs another sort of word: and only “kitsch” lies to hand. I should indicate how ‘privately’ I am using this difficult word, and I hope this will do: kitsch sensibility mistakes for illumination the vagrant excitement words will afford.

The Inheritance of Loss is the labour of eleven years, apparently, and commendable for just that reason perhaps; but it isn’t quite the product of “a terrific writer”. Master Salman is not entirely mistaken though: Ms. Desai is an unnervingly inept writer.

No need for to thank me,
Hans