

Introduction

Travellers of the Last Night*

When at the age of twenty one, I went to Lahore to meet my Pakistani father for the first time in my adult life, I was given, in addition to a new Pakistani family, a copy of my grandfather's poems. It was a blue book, simply published, with flames dancing on the cover. Those flames stood for *aatish*, fire in Urdu, because the book's title—and the origin of my name—was *aatish kada*, fire temple. This picture of the flames was all I could make sense of at the time—the poems were in the Urdu script, of which I knew too little to read even my name. My grandfather had died in 1950 when my father was only six. This book then, both for being my only patrimony and for being written in a script I couldn't read, was a mysterious gift.

But deeper than these particular circumstances was another mystery: the mystery of why the script should have been unfamiliar to me at all. My mother's family were Sikhs from what is today Pakistani Punjab; they would have lived no more than a few hundred kilometres from where my father's family lived; they would have spoken the same languages, namely Punjabi and some Urdu. They came, in 1947, as refugees to Delhi, which along with Lucknow, was the centre of Urdu. So how was it that I, six decades later, having grown up in Delhi, could not read my paternal grandfather's poems?

* Loosely derived from Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poem, 'Sham-e-Firaq'

‘They stole it! And we also let it go,’ Zafar Moradabadi said mournfully, speaking of Pakistan and Urdu respectively. He was the man with whom I had sat down, four years after receiving my strange patrimony, to conquer its mysteries.

He came to me through the Ghalib Academy, a crumbling, art deco building with pink walls and smelly carpets. Himself a poet, Zafar’s name twice resonated the names of poets before him: Zafar like the poet-king, Bahadur Shah Zafar; Moradabadi, like Jigar Moradabadi, the other, more famous, product of the brass producing town of Moradabad.

Zafar didn’t like coming to me through the Academy. I felt he was embarrassed at having to teach. Even on the telephone, he seemed to want to establish a reason other than need for teaching me.

‘Aatish? Aatish Taseer?’ he asked in his papery voice, ‘But that’s a poet’s name.’

‘Yes, sir. My grandfather was a poet. I want to learn to read his poetry.’

‘Your grandfather was MD Taseer, the poet, and you don’t know Urdu?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then it appears I have something of a duty to teach you.’

He came to see me a few days later. He had a light, gliding step. He wore a safari suit, a white woollen cap and finely made spectacles. He was of medium height with a slight stoop. His eyes were yellow, his skin dark, he had a pencil thin moustache and sores, black and bleeding, ate away at his scalp.

I saw them when I asked if he would like to take his cap off.

'I wear it because the wool from my head has come off,' he said, and laughed throatily. Then, folding away his cap, he revealed his bald head.

'I can't take the heat,' he apologised, when he saw me notice the sores.

He sat there with his hands discreetly by his side. He asked no prying questions, he didn't look around the flat. I asked him if he would like tea.

'I don't normally. My constitution is quite sensitive.'

We started badly. I said I didn't want to learn to write, only to read.

'You can't take a language, break it into pieces, take what you like and leave the rest for the Pakistanis. What if you find you need to write?'

'But I always write on my computer.'

'Yes, but what if you're in a poetry reading and you want to scribble down a couplet.'

'I can write it in Devanagari.'

His face filled with placid disgust.

'Then perhaps you should learn Hindi.'

'My grandfather's poetry...'

'I could have it transcribed for you in Devanagari. Problem solved.'

'Listen, please, I want to read Faiz, Manto, Chughtai...'

'All available in Devanagari.'

'I'll learn to write.'

His face bloomed with affection and concern. 'You know you have a responsibility. You're a poet's grandson; your great-uncle was Faiz; you have a tradition to uphold.'

I'm not saying that you should write poetry. I would never send you into poetry. It's finished. Look at how I've suffered. I tell my children all the time that poetry is finished. But what's been done is still there, for you to read and know. You say you want just to read; even that will only come when you can write.'

I offered tea again. He said he didn't normally drink it, but he would today.

When Sati came in with the tea a few minutes later, Zafar was saying in Urdu that life had forced him to become an intellectual mercenary. Those two words, neither of which I knew, provided us with our first thrill as teacher and student. We stumbled about for a bit, coming up with mental soldier, then I was sure I had it. 'Think tank!' We backtracked and gave up. It was only when he explained further that I understood what he had meant.

'I gave birth,' he said, 'to seven PhDs before I was born, and since my own birth, I have given birth to two more. It's dishonest, I know. I take money to write people's theses for them, undeserving people. It's wrong, I know. But I only ever did it from need. I feel that makes it less wrong.'

'How did you start doing it?'

'I used to work as an accountant,' he replied, 'but that slipped away from me. The accounts were computerised. I needed money badly. I even had a breakdown, you know?'

'What kind of breakdown?'

'A nervous breakdown. I was lucky—a south Indian doctor helped me. Only he knew what it was. Without him, I wouldn't be here today. There was a threat of my brain haemorrhaging.'

‘Can that happen from a nervous breakdown?’

‘Yes, my head used to become so hot, my wife couldn’t touch it.’

I began to think of his sores differently.

‘He used to tell me, “You have to stop thinking.” I said, “Doctor saab, it is my nature. Can you order a flower to stop giving off its scent? It is God given.”’

He shook lightly with inaudible laughter, finishing in a wheeze.

‘At that point,’ he said, ‘a PhD candidate came to me. He had a famously strict advisor. A man who used to tear up theses if he didn’t like them. He asked me to help him. I said, “Listen, I can’t do this. I haven’t done your research. I don’t know what you wish to say.” But, he went away and came back with all his books, begging me. I said, “Let’s just try it. If he likes it, then we’ll continue.” He agreed and I wrote the thesis.’

‘Did the professor like it?’

‘He said it was the best thing he’d read in twenty years of advising. After that, word spread,’ he added bitterly. ‘Would you like a cigarette?’

‘Yes,’ I replied though I wasn’t really a smoker, ‘but outside.’

We smoked a Win cigarette on the balcony. There, overlooking heavy Delhi trees, he brought up money.

‘I can’t take less than five thousand,’ he said, taking back the blue and white packet.

‘A month?’

‘Yes.’

My face became hot with shame, but I said nothing. Neither his sores nor his haggard face could have

expressed his poverty more extremely. He wanted five thousand rupees for two–three hours, five days a week. I had just paid twice that amount at Barbarian gym. I didn't know how to say I wanted to give him more. I didn't want to upset his calculations. So we settled at five thousand a month and Zafar began to come every day to teach me Urdu, from three to six.

Zafar had become a poet and moved to Delhi in the days when it was still possible to do so. Making a living as a poet was never easy, but in the early seventies there was still an Urdu literary culture, there were publishers, there were well attended discussions and readings and most of all, there were still poets. And for many, there was the Bombay screen where men like Sahir Ludhianvi and Shakeel Badayuni, to name only a few, were able to supplement their income as song writers. It was a time when, Zafar recalled, horse carriages would run along the stretch of road that connected the Red Fort to Fatehpuri. The road itself, now treeless, was then lined with many shade-giving trees.

In the four decades that passed, from the time when Zafar moved to Delhi to the time when he started teaching me Urdu, he saw that world, the world in which it was still feasible to be an Urdu poet, die around him. The movies changed, the literary gatherings became fewer and less well attended, Urdu publishing sank, India stopped producing major poets at all, and even the city Zafar had moved to, the city that had nurtured men like Mir, Ghalib, Momin and Dagh, turned to slum. Zafar blamed a part of this decay on what he saw as the artificial claim by Pakistan on Urdu. Urdu was not the natural language of any part

of what would become the territory of Pakistan; with its many Persian and Arabic borrowings, it was imported as a way for the new state to realise its Islamic aims; and it was possible to see this as co-opting high culture from one place and transplanting it to another. Zafar knew that Pakistan, as a secular state for Indian Muslims, would have always had to do cultural acrobatics of this kind. What he could less easily forgive was secular India, in response, he felt, Sanskritising Hindi and letting Urdu sink. But Zafar was only half right.

He was the first to admit that Urdu in India hadn't really sunk; its literary culture, like with many Indian languages in the post Independence years, had declined, but as a language, it dominated television and cinema; it was still understood, still spoken. The Indian state had tried, and continues to try, putting forward a Sanskritised Hindi—prompting the actor Johnny Walker to remark, “They [news broadcasters] should not announce “Ab Hindi mein samachar suniye” [Now, we'll hear the news in Hindi], but “Ab samachar mein Hindi suniye” [Now, we'll hear some Hindi in the news]’—but Bollywood, and later television, put up a far more robust front for the language to remain what it was. And it is that language of Bombay cinema, with its heavy Urdu influence, in which a traveller is a musafir, not a yatri, and a conspiracy, a saazish, not a shadyantra, that endures as the language of undivided north India, understood effortlessly on both sides of the Indian and Pakistani borders. So when I pressed Zafar about what he had meant, he confessed that it was a question of lippi or script: what had stood between me and my grandfather's poetry.

Zafar felt that it would have been possible to retain the Arabic–Persian script for this hybrid language, even after Independence. But the question of script had become heavy with religious and political sentiment—often related to liturgical texts—long before Independence, and I couldn’t imagine Hindu majority India accepting the Arabic–Persian script for its main national language. Zafar’s own passion for his script was an indicator of corresponding passions in Sikhs and Hindus for theirs. And later, he confessed, using the word *mizaaaj*, which is disposition, temperament and taste, ‘One’s *mizaaaj* is contained in one’s script.’

Zafar’s charge that Urdu had been falsely claimed by Pakistan also needed qualification. It was true that Urdu was not the natural language of the land that was to be Pakistan, but a great majority of the demand for the new state, and later the immigration, came from Urdu speaking India. More importantly, Urdu had come as an import to Punjab well before Independence and Punjab, by the early twentieth century, in men like Allama Iqbal and later Faiz Ahmed Faiz, was producing its great modern poets. It was into this flowering of Urdu in Punjab that my grandfather was born in 1902. And it was ten years later, into that still youthful age, when the first war had not yet begun, when Gandhi was still to return to India, when Jallianwala Bagh was just a public garden, that Saadat Hasan Manto was born. By the time he was dead in 1955, only forty two years later, there had been another war, an independence movement and a partition that left Manto in one country and Bombay, the city he wrote most about, in another. He had first gone there

as a young man; he worked in its film industry through the thirties and forties; he left for Lahore soon after Partition when Hindu–Muslim violence erupted in the city. Though born in the Ludhiana district, and at times in his life, a resident of Amritsar, Delhi and Lahore, it was Bombay he loved and never got over.

And it was some six months into my lessons with Zafar that, when newly reading in Urdu and hungry for prose, I read my first Manto story about Bombay. The affection that had grown between Zafar and I softened his insistence on teaching me to write. I'd mastered the script's meaningful single and double dots and mysterious elisions, but if I confused the dot for an 'n' with the dot for a 'b', Zafar would croak irritably that if I'd followed his advice and learned to write first, none of this would have been a problem. He brought me an Indian edition of Manto's stories, but it was badly printed and the glue stank. When I sent for a Pakistani edition, he took offence. If ever he found an error in the printing, a crucial dot missing, he'd say, 'The Pakistanis have stolen it.'

The story we began with was 'Ten Rupees'. It is a story about a girl in a Bombay chawl, called Sarita, who is still under fifteen and young for her age when her mother and a procurer called Kishori send her into prostitution. But Sarita is unaware of these circumstances because she is blinded by a great love. Sarita loves cars so much that her dealings with men become just another occasion for her to ride in a motor car, to feel the blasts of wind and to see the trees around her race; she hardly knows she's a prostitute. And this innocence in the foreground, with the squalor of the chawl and Sarita's trade in the background,

become the lines on which the story's tension is cast. The narrative is set around a day in the country that Sarita spends with three young clients from Hyderabad.

In the main market, a yellow car was parked outside a long factory wall, near a small board that read, 'It is forbidden to urinate here.' Inside, the three young Hyderabadi men waiting for Kishori held their handkerchiefs to their noses. They would have liked to park the car ahead somewhere, but the factory wall was long and the stench of urine drifted down its entire stretch.

Sarita appears a few minutes later in a blue georgette sari. There's some initial awkwardness, but as the car picks up speed, her excitement takes over. Soon she and the Hyderabadi boys are driving fast through the countryside, singing Devika Rani and Ashok Kumar songs and composing duets.

Then the road straightened and the seashore came in sight. The sun was setting and the sea wind brought a chill in the air.

The car stopped. Sarita opened the door, jumped out and began to run along the shore. Kafayat and Shahab ran behind her. In the open air, on the edge of the vast ocean, with the great palms rising up from the wet sand, Sarita didn't know what it was that she wanted. She wished she could melt into the sky; spread through the ocean; fly so high that she could see the palm canopies from above; for all

the wetness of the shore to seep from the sand into her feet and then... and then for that same racing engine, that same speed, those blasts of wind, the car honking—she was very happy.

This is the climax of ‘Ten Rupees’: the sudden view of the sea; the chill at close of day; and the abandon of a young prostitute who cannot express her situation. Manto, as if relishing what might seem like an anti-climax, bends the narrative around something as ordinary as a ten rupee note, which Sarita accepts in a moment of excitement from one of the boys, but returns at the end of the story. “‘This... why should I take this money?’” she replied and ran off, leaving Kafayat still staring at the limp note.’

When I finished ‘Ten Rupees’, I knew that something about the quality of its detail, and the oblique gaze of the narrator, the story of a chawl and a prostitute told through a girl’s love of cars, had altered my life as a reader. If before, I had read looking for language and rhythms that I liked, I was reading now to understand how a writer like Manto could evoke his world with a single detail; I was reading to see how he engaged his material so that a narrative seemed to spring naturally from it, a narrative that not only didn’t rely on ornate writing and description, but would have been obscured by it. So affecting was the experience that I wondered why I hadn’t grown up reading Manto. The answer, I discovered, was that he wasn’t taught widely in schools; and though his language would easily have been understood by the average north Indian reader, he was locked into Urdu

curriculum; Devanagari editions of his stories were hard to come by and English translations of his writing dense and bland; he had either been forgotten in India, or disowned. Feeling I knew why, and feeling also that India had too few writers of his calibre—either with the richness and breadth of his material or the simplicity of his prose—to allow any to leave for Pakistan, I sat down to do the first translation of ‘Ten Rupees’.

At the time, I was forming my first understanding of economy, an understanding to which Manto was to become essential. Just a few weeks earlier, an older writer friend had suggested I read Pushkin, Gandhi and RK Narayan to see what they did. I had begun with Pushkin, reading first *The Captain's Daughter*. When, a week or so later, I met the writer again and told him I'd read *The Captain's Daughter*, his face brightened and he asked, ‘How does Pushkin describe St Petersburg in *The Captain's Daughter*?’ I went through the story in my head; it was still fresh, but I had no answer for him. I couldn't recall any description of St Petersburg even though I knew the story's last scene was set there. I became even more puzzled that evening when I went back to the Pushkin to see how he described St Petersburg: he didn't. ‘With Pushkin,’ the writer said when we met again, ‘he'll do one or two things. There'll be a coat hanging in the room. And the scene is there. No more needs to be said.’

‘A coat hanging in the room. And the scene is there!’ This was also what Manto could do. Like in *The Captain's Daughter*, in ‘Ten Rupees’ Bombay is hardly described. There's a single reference to bazaars clogging with traffic from cars, buses, trams and pedestrians as Sarita and

the boys are leaving town, but that is all. Bombay is that factory wall with the stench of urine drifting down its entire stretch. And this quality of detail, seeming to contain an entire milieu in a few lines, runs right through Manto. In 'Khaled Mian', the stillness of the night as Mumtaz waits for news of his dying child: 'It was ten at night. The maidan was dark and silent. Sometimes the horn of a car would graze the silence as it went past. Up ahead, over a high wall, the illuminated hospital clock could be seen.' In 'Ram Khilavan', the austerity of the narrator's room: 'It was a tiny room, destitute of even an electric light. There was one table, one chair and one sack-covered cot with a thousand bedbugs.' In 'My Name is Radha', a restaurant where all the movie people came: 'I'd spend whole days at Gulab's Hotel, drinking tea. Everyone who came in was either partially or entirely drenched. The flies too, seeking shelter from the rain, collected within. It was squalid beyond words. A squeezed rag for making tea was draped on one chair; on another, lay a foul smelling knife, used for cutting onions, but now idle.' Though Manto's economy can be seen in each of these stories, nowhere is it more fully realised than in 'Ram Khilavan'.

In under ten pages of short sentences, each sprung like a cricket bat, he conveys what feels like an entire lifetime in Bombay. The thread of the story is a relationship between the narrator and his dhobi. When the narrator is poor and living in a 'tiny room, destitute of even an electric light', the dhobi, illiterate and warmhearted, overlooks his unpaid bills. The narrator's fortunes improve, he gets married, moves to a bigger place, the

dhobi continues to come. One day the dhobi falls sick with alcohol poisoning and the narrator's wife takes him in a car to the doctor, and so, saves his life. The dhobi never forgets this kindness. Then Partition happens, the city is inflamed with Hindu–Muslim riots and the narrator decides to leave for Pakistan. On his last evening in Bombay, he goes to the dhobi to pick up his clothes. The curfew hour is approaching and he finds himself surrounded by a murderous mob of drunken dhobis, of whom one is his. The dhobi, in a drunken haze, is about to attack the narrator when he recognises him. The next day, the narrator's last in Bombay, the dhobi brings the clothes as usual. He is overwhelmed with regret, but is never really able to express himself. A few hours later, the narrator leaves Bombay, never to return. The sense of loss and futility, told through this story of the little people one knew and has now to leave behind, is devastating. So much else is contained in the story's compass: the nature of Partition violence; the kind of person who fell prey to it; how relationships in a city can change through such violence. The writer seems to be writing from deep within his material so that none of this is added externally, but is part of the fiction's logic. The economy is not forced or done simply for the sake of economy; it feels necessary, an aspect of the story's urgency.

Given the extent to which Manto inhabits his material, there is something miraculous, like with Maupassant, whom Manto read and admired, that his range should have been so vast. He wrote about prostitution, religious superstition, adolescent anxiety, sex, the Partition of India and Bombay cinema in the thirties and forties. They

were the great themes of his time and though the stories are not forgiving, nor do they falsify the hard realities of India, there is something euphoric in the writing; it is easy to sense the writer's joy in the newness and variety of life.

Manto investigated these themes, using sometimes a third person narrator, and sometimes, as in 'Ram Khilavan', a narrator called Manto. Manto, the narrator, should not be confused with Manto, the man or the writer. He is like the narrators used by Proust and VS Naipaul, and though travelling under the writer's name, he is, if anything, a more forceful creation of the imagination. Nor are the stories any less a work of fiction than if an omniscient, third person narrator had been used. This kind of narrator is not a gimmick; he serves a distinct purpose. In an immigrant city like Bombay, where no cultural knowledge can be assumed, where the landscape is often foreign and various, Manto, the fictional presence, declares his outsider's perspective and becomes a kind of guide to the new terrain. He marks out the world; the reader can put himself in his hands; his discoveries become part of the narrative. His gaze, like in 'Ten Rupees', is always oblique and a little perverse. The situation of women in society might be dealt with through the anger of an affronted prostitute, an adolescent's sexual discovery through a satin blouse.

It is hard not to come to feel a great affection for this narrator. He is mischievous, compassionate, funny, a listener, a drinker, sceptical and without prejudice. His Bombay is a city of motor cars and bicycles, of chawls and mansions, of hookers and heiresses, of Sikhs and Parsis,

of depressives and lunatics, and he asserts his nativity by moving freely between its varied lives, making it seem like no less his right than sitting on a bench at Apollo Bandar, watching boats and people go by. At one point in her essay, 'My Friend, My Enemy', Manto's great friend, Ismat Chughtai, questions a description Manto gives to her of a friend of his.

That he could be a rascal and at the same time an extremely honest and honourable man, how could that be? I didn't even try to understand. This was Manto's territory. From the jilted squalor and refuse of life, he picks out pearls. He enjoys digging in the refuse because he doesn't trust the luminaries of the world; he doesn't trust their brilliance or their judgement. He catches the thieves that lie in the hearts of their pure and respectable wives. And he compares them to the purity in the heart of a whore in a brothel.

As much as one would like to separate Manto, the writer, from Manto, the man, it is not always easy to do so. There is the added confusion of how much Manto's main narrator seems to resemble both writer and man. All of this makes it harder to bear that ugly truth about Manto, the man: that for all his love of Indian multiplicity, he went to Pakistan. He even tried convincing Chughtai to go. 'The future looks beautiful in Pakistan,' he said to her, 'We'll be able to get the houses of people who've fled from there. It'll be just us there. We'll progress very quickly.' When I read this, I had trouble holding the two Mantos in my mind. It seemed impossible that the creator of Manto, the

narrator and fictional presence, so immersed in the variety of India, seeming so much to rejoice in it, should also be the author of that remark, with its sly wish for homogeneity, for the place where 'It'll be just us.' Chughtai, for other reasons, was also disgusted. The two had an intensely close friendship. He spoke movingly to her about the son he'd lost, giving details about bathing him, and how he would pick up things from the floor and put them in his mouth, details which seem to have fed directly into 'Khaled Mian'. Manto and Chughtai argued and fought and laughed about everything from love and relationships to language and literature, but never seriously, except over Pakistan. 'I'd had so many fights and arguments with him,' she wrote, 'but never over a serious matter of principle. In that moment, I realised what a coward Manto was. He was ready to save his life at any cost. To make his future, he was ready to get his hands on the life earnings of people who were fleeing. And I began to feel a hatred for him.'

Manto did not just regret his decision to go to Pakistan; it destroyed him. In his stunning essay on the 1949 'Cold Flesh' trial (in which, it must be said, my grandfather, though he said little to damn him, appeared on the side of the prosecution) in Lahore, he pointedly answers Chughtai's charge of taking part in the property grab and denies ever having done so. He also seems very early to anticipate the larger cultural questions the Partition would bring up for both Pakistan and India. He wrote of his arrival in Lahore:

Try as I did, I wasn't able to separate Pakistan from India and India from Pakistan. Again and again,

troubling questions rang in my mind: Will Pakistan's literature be separate from that of India's? If so, how? Who owns all that was written in undivided India? Will that be partitioned too? Are India's and Pakistan's core problems not the same? Will Urdu be totally wiped out in India? What shape will it take here in Pakistan? Will our state be a religious one? We'll defend the state at all cost, but does that mean we won't have permission to criticise its government? As an independent country, will our condition be different from what it was under the British?

In Pakistan, Manto was tried twice for obscenity. He and Chughtai had faced obscenity trials before Independence as well, but there is a marked difference in the tone of his descriptions of the pre-Partition trials versus those in Pakistan. There is a lightness about the earlier trials: he travels up to Lahore with Chughtai; they buy slippers along the way; and at the 1941 trial of 'Smoke', he seems to be having a positively good time, lecturing the court on Maupassant. But in Pakistan, the trials were longer, more exacting, and the outcome, more disturbing; there were arrests, searches and the risk of jail time with hard labour. In January 1952, in between trials, Manto wrote,

My mind was in a strange state. I couldn't understand what I should do. Whether I should stop writing or carry on totally regardless of this scrutiny. Truth be told, it had left such a bad taste that I almost wished some place would be allotted to me where I could sit

in one corner, away for some years from pens and ink wells; should thoughts arise in my mind, I would hang them at the gallows; and should an allotment not be possible, I could begin work as a black marketeer or start distilling illicit alcohol...

It was the latter that finally claimed Manto. His last years were beset with financial troubles; he drank heavily; he wrote to Chughtai on more than one occasion, pleading with her to find a way for him to come back to India. She was surprised to learn that far from large protests and signed declarations on his behalf, many in Pakistan felt he deserved to be punished. He died on January 18, 1955 in Lahore at the age of forty two.

In death, Manto paid a greater price for his migration than he had when he was alive. He was forgotten in the country he wrote most about. He became part of a number of artists, musicians and writers whom India disowned—sometimes by singling them out, sometimes as part of a larger disowning of Urdu—for their migration. It might appear strange to someone reading this collection why I, with my mixed Indian and Pakistani heritage, have included so few of Manto's famous Partition stories in this collection. The reason is that I found, with their simple symmetries, drenched in that bittersweet irony of how one people could have ended up as two nations, they were the only stories of Manto's two hundred and fifty that today, feel dated. But it is also for this reason, because so little has ended up as symmetrical in the fortunes of India and Pakistan, that India must now reclaim men like Manto. In Pakistan, Manto's world, crowded with

Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, would feel very foreign. It is only in India, still plural, not symmetrically Hindu, that it continues to have relevance. His eye could only have been an Indian eye, sensitive to surprising detail, compulsively aware of Indian plurality, sympathetic to people trapped in their circumstances, here pointing to a particular Hindu festival, there imitating Bombay street dialect.

Writers rarely set out to be national writers. They need small, intimate worlds, full of details; the macro scale of countries, especially those as wide and various as India, cannot be their direct material. Cities, neighbourhoods, sometimes a single street, provide the gritty detail in which a larger architecture can become visible. For Manto, this city, as Dublin was for Joyce and Chicago for Bellow, was Bombay. He was not an Indian or Pakistani writer as much as he was a Bombay writer, and more than India, the city of Bombay must reclaim Manto.

Khalid Hasan, Manto's Pakistani translator, has done what he can to make Manto available in English, and though exhaustive, his translations not only lack the simplicity, speed and vitality of Manto's prose, they are guilty of the greatest crime any translator can commit, the crime of trying to improve upon the writer. This well meaning journalist paraphrases Manto; he deletes entire paragraphs in 'For Freedom'; and rearranges chunks of text in 'Blouse', even deciding to change the colour of the blouse from purple or violet to 'azure'. The result is that his translations are not really close translations at all; they are synopses.

Having said this, the challenges of translating Manto are considerable. What is rich, fluent prose in Urdu can

appear florid in English; Manto leaves loose ends, his sentences can be mangled. He also becomes a victim of his form, namely the short story's dependence on trick and surprise endings. David Coward, in his introduction to Maupassant's stories, writes,

For the short story, while admitted to be extremely difficult to manage successfully, has long been regarded as somehow second rate, not least because it is generally felt to suffer from Cleverness. Perhaps it requires too much control, so that the reader feels manipulated, and because many short stories depend so much on irony or sudden reversals, they may seem overcontrived—like a joke which, once told, loses its tension.

For the reader of the novel especially, this kind of ending can be hard to stomach. In stories like 'My Name is Radha', and even 'Licence', one is almost left wishing for an unfinished ending rather than the one of high drama. And yet, I feel in the end, it is better for the translator to lay himself at the feet of his subject than try, at this late stage, to tidy him up, especially when dealing with as natural and gifted a writer as Manto. Translations are often criticised for being too literal, but in the case of Manto's translators, I feel they haven't been literal enough, that they have tried to rewrite the stories. This translation aims at being very literal, relishing especially, the feeling of the other language breaking through. The stories I have selected are only a few, but they show Manto's range both in style and subject.

The translations became a way for me, with my mixed

heritage, to limit the effects of the intellectual partition Manto feared. The linking of language to religion, followed by the partition along religious lines, has left the subcontinent's intellectual past fenced up and pitted with no go zones; it has constantly to be sorted through, constantly to be excavated and reclaimed. The translations were part of a larger feeling in me that I would rather end up with Sanskrit and Urdu than neither. It was English, both for its impartiality and the opportunity its literary life offers, that made this possible. And for the same reasons, translations of Manto into English become important. It is a strange truth about Indian intellectual life that the road to rediscovering a writer like Manto in the original is bound to run first through English.

But for those without English, men like Zafar Moradabadi, who became an Urdu poet when it was still possible to do so, the currents of intellectual life have washed them up on less secure shores.

Zafar lives in the Sui Valan section of the old city of Delhi. I went to his house for the first time one smoky December night, on Eid. He picked me up outside Delite cinema, admonishing me for bringing him flowers and sweets. As we entered the old city, some men from the abattoir were unloading a truckload of meat. The rickshaw splashed through a pale, brownish-red puddle; the smell and the frenzy of flies gave it away as blood. Narrow streets, crowded that night with bright kerosene lights and people in their new clothes, led to Zafar's house. We arrived in front of a darkened entrance. Near an open drain, a bitch tended to her family of fluffy grey puppies. A flight of steep stone stairs, chipped at the edges, led up

to a pale green door and a landing, lit by a single light.

Zafar had warned me many times on the way how small his house was. 'But the hearts of the people in it are big,' he added. I had imagined his house would be a small flat, with a kitchen, a bathroom, two rooms perhaps, at least room enough to stand up, to walk around. But Zafar's house was a single room, no bigger than a carpet, covered with sheets of chequered cloth. Its pistachio green walls were high and there were shelves all around, stacked to the ceiling with hard suitcases and trunks so that it felt almost like being in a godown. Everything was neatly in its place: a sewing machine with a pink satin cover, necessary where clothes are repaired often; a little shelf with holy Zam Zam water, oils and a pair of scissors; green-covered copies of Zafar's new book. There was no kitchen, just a ledge with pulses and grains stacked high on one side. Its stone surface was used for washing, the water disappearing through an opening in the floor. The bathroom was a single metal sheet, leading to a drain. Everything was hanging—towels, toothbrushes, clothes, including a green bra, all heaped over a nylon rope. The air was fetid and filled the little room.

Zafar's family of five couldn't physically fit in the room and he slept on the floor of a magazine office in another part of the old city, near Ghalib's old house. He had once saved enough money to buy a better place. But in 1997, the year when the accounts had become computerised, his wife had fallen from the stairs and all his savings were spent on her treatment. She was there now, dressed in a black kameez with red flowers on it. She was a fat woman, with curly hair and pale skin. She was smiling,

and though her face was made up, something in her eyes suggested damage, almost as if they were unused to emotions other than distress.

That night, as we ate a small feast on an oil cloth in the little room, a number of strong feelings occurred to me at once. There was the very romantic idea of the old city, even in total collapse, as still sheltering poets; there was the miracle of Zafar and his family retaining their refinement despite the squalor around them; there was also a feeling of dread for India, for any country that would let its men of learning live in conditions like these. When I thought harder about it, I was struck by how genteel and unlikely a calamity this was. Urdu had not died, but its literary culture in India had, and it had left its casualties, of which Zafar was one. His fate had been tied up with the fate of the language. I found it suddenly painful to think that the man who had helped me to understand and translate had himself ended up a prisoner of language. He had once said to me, 'There is knowledge. Everything else comes and goes.' But only now, seeing him in the poverty and decay that threatened always to diminish him, I understood how he must have clung to that exalted idea; and how at times, it must have been so difficult to defend. He had also reminded me, in relation to Urdu, that I had a tradition to uphold. The words then were just part of a lively argument; I hadn't known about the life spent in service of that tradition, even as the infrastructure of literature collapsed around him. Zafar had also described himself as an intellectual mercenary. But here, as I'd found so often with him, he was only half right. There was no denying that the life that had aged

him and left him covered in sores, himself like a tattered page out of Manto, had been a fighting life. But what had been fought for was not fortune, but his gentle manners, his decency and the six hundred years of poetry ready on his blackened lips. And watching Zafar Moradabadi sit back against the wall, smoking a Win cigarette, it was not so much the mercenary that came to mind as the martyr.

Aatish Taseer, New Delhi, 2008