

ZAMIRUDDIN AHMAD

Purvai—The Easterly Wind

THE BOY LIFTED HIS HEAD from the notebook and looked at the closed door behind which his father was changing his clothes.

“Father,” he said, “what does *purvā* mean?”

The answer came from the kitchen instead, where his mother was frying *parāṭhās* for breakfast: “*Purvā’ī.*”

“The wind that blows in an easterly direction?”

“No,” she answered, lifting the *parāṭhā* from the skillet and stacking it on the pile in the breadcloth, “rather, the wind that blows from the east.”

“It’s also called *purvayyā*—isn’t it?”

The door opened. The father, buttoning up the front of his shirt, walked into the veranda where one three-legged chair and three perfectly good ones stood flanking a round table covered with a dusty plastic cover. A schoolbag lay open on the table before the boy who sat in one of the chairs, bent over a notebook on which he was writing something.

The father buttoned his right sleeve and asked, “What’s this all about?”

“Oh, I’ve got to make a sentence.”

“So have you made one?”

The boy gently pushed the notebook toward his father. The latter looked down at it and read out loud: “If the wind blows from the east, it’s called *purvā’ī.*” After a pause he remarked, “But that’s the meaning!”

“So?” the boy scratched his head.

She walked the mother holding a plate with a *parāṭhā* and a small serving of spiced scrambled eggs. She set the plate before the boy and

“*Purvā’ī.*” in *Nayā Daur*, Nos. 81–82 (n.d.), pp. 91–103. Reprinted from Muhammad Umar Memon, ed., *The Tale of the Old Fisherman: Contemporary Urdu Short Stories* (Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1991), pp. 35–44.

said, "Write!"

The boy promptly bowed his head over the notebook again.

"One of the effects of *purvā'ī* is that it cheers up even the saddest person, for a while at least, and . . ."

The boy lifted his eyes from the notebook and fixed them on his mother's face. She thought for some time and then said, "That'll do. Get rid of the 'and!'"

The boy dutifully struck out the word.

Meanwhile she quickly returned to the kitchen adjoining the veranda with its door opening into a small courtyard.

The boy shut the notebook, stuffed it into his schoolbag, and began hurriedly eating his breakfast. After he was done eating, he walked to the water-tank in the courtyard by the kitchen door and rinsed his mouth a few times. He dried his hands on a small towel hung on a clothesline in the courtyard, slung the schoolbag on his shoulder, and said, "Mother, I'll be late this evening. There's a field hockey match."

He then said goodbye to her, unlatched the courtyard door and scurried out.

Not long afterwards she returned with a plate: a couple of *parāṭhās* and a small portion of some gravied meat dish left over from the previous evening. She put the plate before her husband, who was now ensconced in the same chair occupied earlier by the boy.

He stared at the plate. "No scrambled eggs for me?"

"There was just one egg," she answered, walking back to the kitchen. "I'll get some more in the evening, on my way home from work. Today's payday."

Back in the kitchen she sat down on the low wicker stool. She took out a piece of stale bread from the breadcloth, broke off a morsel, dipped it in the gravy left over in the pan, popped it into her mouth and started to slowly chew. After a couple of mouthfuls, she put the bread back into the cloth.

"Aren't you going to eat breakfast?" he called, mopping the plate clean with the last of his bread.

"Oh, I've already eaten," she replied from the kitchen, removing the pot from the stove and pouring the boiling water into the tea kettle.

"When?"

"While you were bathing."

He heard the sound of a spoon being twirled in a cup and asked, "You'll at least make me some tea, or . . .?"

In response she promptly walked in with two cups neatly placed on

saucers. She put one down before him and the other before herself, then settled into an empty chair.

He took a sip of the steaming brew and absent-mindedly began to scratch at the plastic tablecloth with his fingernail, trying to take off the stubborn stain left there by lentil gravy.

She too took a sip and said, "Never mind, I'll clean it off."

They sipped their tea for a while. After some time he said, "This is the second day in a row that I've had to wear the same shirt."

"Oh well. The laundryman never shows up on time. We'll have to find another."

"But maybe a couple of shirts could be washed at home."

"Why not?" There was a sharp sound as the teacup hit the saucer. "The whole pile of dirty laundry could be washed at home."

He was stunned. "Now you're cross with me."

She didn't bother to respond.

He gently took her hand and began to caress it. But she pulled it away—quickly, brusquely. He rose and strode toward the back of her chair and installed himself behind her, so close that only the thin wooden back of the chair separated their bodies. He put his palms on her pale cheeks, stooped over her and kissed her matted hair. Then he raised his right finger and touched her gently across her firmly closed lips. Both his hands slid down along her loose hair, lingered awhile on her shoulders and then wandered slyly further down.

She drew back and sprang to her feet. "I have a lot of things to do . . ."

He snickered—out of embarrassment.

"I've got to do the dishes, make the beds, take a bath . . ."

He grabbed her shoulders and pressed on them to force her to sit down. Then he pulled over a chair, sat down in it facing her and said, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she said, fixing her gaze on her unadorned nails.

"Look at me!"

But she didn't; instead, she said, "This isn't the right time."

"And last night?"

"I had a headache."

He laughed. "You're a great one for making excuses." There was a trace of sarcasm in his voice.

She collected the teacups and started off for the kitchen. Her ample buttocks, swaying beneath the folds of her sari, touched off a wave of excitement throughout his body before they dissolved into the grey

darkness of the kitchen.

Just as she was stepping out of the store her eye fell on a chauffeur-driven car parking some distance away on the opposite side of the street. A man sat in the rear, his head resting comfortably against the back of the seat. She started. The chauffeur got out, walked back and opened the rear door. She quickly slipped behind a tree next to the sidewalk. A tallish man, with a slightly dark complexion, wearing a suit and tie and a pair of shiny shoes, got down. After exchanging a few words with the chauffeur he walked away from the car and entered into a nearby lane. The chauffeur returned to sit in the car.

Her throat constricted and went completely dry; her feet felt incredibly heavy; and she broke into a fine sweat. She felt as though her eyes were ready to pop out of their sockets and follow the man into the lane. She swallowed uneasily once or twice and nervously rubbed first her forehead and then her temples. She took the end of her sari lying over her shoulders and carefully covered her head with it and came out from behind the tree. She took a few hesitant steps toward the other side of the street, but faltered. She stood still, staring at the car vacantly for a few moments. Then she hastily crossed the street, walked up to the parked car, and stopped a couple of feet away from the chauffeur, unable to make up her mind whether she wanted to stop or move on ahead.

The chauffeur examined her from head to toe. Her grip on the shopping-bag tightened. She started to walk over, but then suddenly midway she did an about-face and began to walk away.

This time the chauffeur looked only at her face.

She turned around again and took a deep breath. Then she walked back to the car and asked the chauffeur, "Who was that gentleman?"

Her question had the casualness of one pedestrian asking another for the time or an address.

The chauffeur eyed her over again and replied, "He's our guest."

"Your guest?"

"Yes. I mean he's visiting my boss. He's from Pakistan."

She hesitated for a bit, then asked, "His name is Masrur Ahmad—isn't it?"

The chauffeur, who had meanwhile started to light a cigarette, blew out the match and tossed it out the window. It landed a few inches from her sandals.

"Don't know," he said. "The boss calls him Qazi-ji."

“Qazi Masrur Ahmad,” she said, as if to herself. “His full name is Qazi Masrur Ahmad.”

“Could be,” the driver said indifferently, and through the windshield he quickly fixed his gaze on the girl in tight clothes who was walking up ahead.

A car, driven by a young woman, passed by her. Another young woman sat next to the driver, her radiant hair blowing in the wind. The rear seat was occupied by a frail man and a portly woman.

She squashed the burnt match-stub with the tip of her sandal, opened the shopping bag, peered around in it, and, walking in a semicircle around the rear of the car, came to a clothes store and stopped in front of it. After a while she walked back to the chauffeur by the same route.

“He’s brought his wife along too—hasn’t he?” she asked, in the manner of a child asking for something nearly impossible to get.

The chauffeur looked at her as though she was crazy. He was apparently irritated at her for coming back and pestering him with yet another question. But, being basically a courteous man, he replied gently, “Wife! No. Qazi Sahib is still a bachelor.”

She quickly thanked him. She turned around, cast a sweeping look down the lane and started off toward the bus station with soft, brisk feet.

When the father, carrying a bundle of files, came into the house, he found the boy at the table doing homework. He put the bundle on the table, sat down in a chair, looked around and asked, “Where’s your mother?”

“Bathing.”

He heard the sound of water splashing in the bathroom.

“This time of day?”

The boy didn’t answer.

The plastic tablecloth suddenly caught the man’s eye. It looked spotlessly clean and shiny. The floor in the veranda too looked immaculate, still slightly wet. Perhaps it’s just been mopped—he thought. The courtyard floor also looked a bit wet here and there. The house had only three rooms, each with its door opening into the veranda. He looked at the first door, then at the second, and then at the third: each looked clean, thoroughly wiped, he speculated, with a duster. The same naked light bulb still hung directly above the table, still covered with its tenacious pile of dust, but somehow he felt it burnt much brighter today.

The sound of bathing ceased. Presently the door opened and she

emerged, wearing fully starched, light green *pajāma*-trousers and a *kurtā*-shirt of the same color, with her wet hair wrapped up in a towel.

"It's late," she said, stopping by her husband. "I missed the six o'clock bus."

Waves of perfume wafted from her body. Her cheeks were flushed. The naked light bulb in the veranda seemed to have set off a whole array of tiny sparks in her eyes.

"Didn't you take a bath in the morning?" he asked, tearing his eyes away from the flashing pink of her cheeks.

"I couldn't. I was running late."

She proceeded toward the same door from which her husband had come out buttoning his shirt earlier in the morning.

"How about getting me a cup of tea?"

"Sure. But let me dry my hair first."

She went into the room. He yanked out a pack of cigarettes and a box of matches from his coat pocket, lit a cigarette and puffed on it.

In the meantime the boy finished his homework, picked up his school things and left for the middle room.

After the last drag the husband threw the cigarette butt down on the floor and squashed it with his shoe. Just as he was getting up, she came out of the room, her hair free of the towel now and spread loosely on her shoulders. The folds of her stiff, starched *dupattā* seemed to have frozen over her breasts. Holding the wet towel in her hand she walked to the courtyard and hung it on the clothesline.

She was about to step into the kitchen when the boy called, "Mother."

"Yes, Munna?"

"I'm hungry."

"All right."

"He hasn't eaten yet?" the father asked.

She shook her head.

"How come?"

"Oh, he had a cup of tea with some toast after he got home from school. He said he wasn't feeling very hungry."

The boy came in and said, "Mother, I want supper."

"Come on Munna. Don't be so impatient. Let me fix tea for your father. Then I'll feed you."

The boy returned to his room. As she was just stepping into the kitchen, her husband got up from his chair and said, "Never mind."

"Why?"

“Let’s eat supper instead. I’m hungry too.”

Sounds of banging pots and pans started to pour out of the kitchen. The boy turned on the radio. The father went into the room to change, then into the bathroom.

In the meantime, she set the table and brought out the food. “All right Munna,” she called out, taking the middle chair, “dinner’s on.”

The boy turned off the radio and came into the veranda. His eyes fell on the platter set in the middle of the table. “Wow!” he let out a joyous cry, “Pilaf today!”

The husband had just dried his hands and mouth on the wet towel hanging on the clothesline in the courtyard and was back in the veranda. “Pilaf?” he said, somewhat surprised.

She held out the platter to him and said, “I got off from work a little early today; so I thought I might cook something special.” She then offered him the bowl of spicy yogurt *rā’eta*.

He took a generous helping of the pilaf and poured some *rā’eta* on it. She served more than half of the remaining pilaf to the boy and dumped the rest on her plate, then pushed the *rā’eta* toward the boy. The boy took some and set the bowl before his mother.

“Very tasty,” the husband remarked after the first mouthful.

“Yeah,” the boy, his mouth full, chimed in.

She smiled.

After the supper dishes were cleared away, she went into the kitchen and promptly returned with a cardboard box which she set on the table.

“My, my, what a treat!” the husband exclaimed, opening the box. “What’s the occasion? Did you get a raise or something?”

He picked up a *gulāb-jāman* and popped it into his mouth.

“Oh no,” she said, suddenly feeling a little embarrassed. “For days now Munna has been begging for sweets. So I thought I might just as well get some. That’s all.”

Then, looking at the boy, she said, “Have some.”

The boy picked out a *laddū*. So did the father. But she took a square of *barfi*.

Presently the boy took a *gulāb-jāman* but, before stuffing it into his mouth, said, “Mother, Siraj Sahib was telling us that the *purvā’i* also has another effect . . .”

“I know,” she said, very softly.

“And what’s that?” the father asked.

“When it blows, it causes old hurts to start aching again. . . . Is that really true?”

“Yes,” she answered, again very softly.

“Have some more,” her husband offered, holding the box.

“That’s enough for me,” she said.

A half hour or so later she went into the kitchen, but returned right away. “What’s the rush?” she said. “I can always do the dishes in the morning.”

“Yes,” the husband, bent over a file, said, without lifting his head.

After some time she went into the boy’s room. When she returned she said, settling back in her chair, “He’s fast asleep.”

“Yes,” he nodded, again without bothering to lift his head.

After a while she got up and brought a magazine from her room and started reading it. But when he bent down to pick up a fresh file from the floor he looked at her out of the corner of his eye and realized that she really wasn’t reading the magazine at all; instead, she was looking intently into the yawning darkness of the courtyard.

When he lifted his head again to light a cigarette, he found her reading the magazine. She looked at him over the magazine, smiled sweetly, and resumed her reading.

After a bit, she slapped the magazine shut and got up. “Well, I’m going to bed.”

“You go on. I’ll be there in a while.”

She went into her room. The sound of her humming continued for a while, then the quiet was absolute.

The moist, thick darkness oozing down from the sky had covered the length of the courtyard; the noise of the traffic outside on the street had grown progressively fainter and ultimately died down; and the bark of a solitary dog arose somewhere far away. He decided it was time to turn in. He closed the last of the files and placed it on top of the pile, rubbed his groggy eyes, lit a cigarette and got up. He then turned off the veranda light, noiselessly pushed her door open and went in.

His eyes met their twin beds, headboards snug against the back wall. The small shaded lamp on the low side table lodged between the beds was still on, its dim glow barely reaching above their beds.

She was sleeping in the bed on the right; her clothes—the same *pajāma-kurtā* suit and *dupaṭṭā* which only a few hours ago had sent a surge of excitement through him—and her bra lay all crumpled and bunched on the easy chair to the right of her bed. So unlike her!—he wondered, a trifle surprised. Wasn’t she, after all, in the habit of neatly folding her clothes and putting them carefully away in the closet every time she changed?

He edged closer to the bed and lifted the lightweight comforter pulled over her body all the way to her shoulders. He was stunned. Free of the last restraint of modesty, her sleeping body somehow seemed fully awake in anticipation of someone. He had the curious feeling that he didn't know that body, that he was looking at it for the first time ever.

He quickly stubbed out the cigarette and, ever so gently, noiselessly, sat down on the edge of her bed. She shifted; and her face, turned slightly toward the easy chair, straightened up and came directly under the lamp's subdued glow. Then, as he stood watching, a faint smile swept over her sealed lips.

He put one hand over the pillow cushioning her head and the other over the pillow lodged under her arm and lowered himself over her face. His parted lips stopped inches away from her closely pressed ones. It seemed as though her eyelids were moist. The vague suspicion was confirmed when he detected a wet spot on the pillow close by her head.

He straightened up, staring tensely for a while at her face and her breasts facing him. Then, ever so gently, he raised his index finger and touched her lips. Her breathing altered, so did the rhythm of her heaving chest. That faint smile abruptly departed from her lips. He held his breath and waited for a few moments. After her breathing returned to normal and the heaving in her chest subsided, he got up, taking the utmost care not to make the slightest sound. For the next few moments he stared vacantly at her body as it lay there comfortably stretched out, awash in its gentle, radiant heat.

Carefully he folded her clothes—her *kurtā-pajāma* suit, her *dupaṭṭā*, her bra—and put them neatly on the easy chair before retiring to his bed. He sat on it for quite a while.

She turned over in bed. Her face was now turned toward him. A smile—the sign of some rich, honeyed dream—was spilling from her lips and the corners of her eyes, bringing to the fresh pink of her cheeks a more vibrant color. The other pillow was hugged tight to her bosom.

He stretched out his arm and pulled the comforter over her nakedness. Then he turned off the lamp and went to sleep.

—Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon