

TASADDUQ SOHAIL

Tree*

I LIKE SOLITUDE. Nobody visits me, nor I anyone. In the morning I set out for wherever fancy strikes me and stop wherever I feel like stopping. I go in whatever direction I please. I don't want anyone to reply to anything I say, nor expect a reply from me. This is why my acquaintances are not my neighbors but rather their cats. These houses, I know them by the cats that live in them: Suti lives in No. 9, Libi in 7 and Suzie in 2. I have never tried to find out who owns these cats. My only interaction is with the cats. Perhaps you wonder how anyone can possibly live like this? Surely one needs others at some point. Surely one must need to say something to someone. Of course such thoughts frequently assail me, especially during winters, when the sky is covered with dirty, drab-looking clouds and rows upon rows of gigantic leafless trees stand listlessly staring up into it. Then it becomes terribly difficult to stay indoors all alone. At such times I try to keep myself busy, very busy. Sometimes by painting, sometimes by reading books, or by listening to Mehdi Hasan or Musarrat Nazir on the radio. Sometimes I let myself be carried far away by the melody of their songs or ghazals to the narrow lanes of Pakistan, its neighborhoods, villages and towns, thinking that it must be 11 in the morning there. Kites must be sailing in the crystal blue sky; simple, ordinary folks must be on their way to work. Thinking thoughts like these and sipping wine, I often doze off. But that day I was feeling terribly depressed. The assault was particularly strong. I felt that my mind would soon explode if I didn't find someone who would relieve my tension. I'd go mad, tear my clothes and jump in front of a bus. I sat holding my head between my hands for quite a while. When the tension inside me

*"Darakht," from the author's first collection *Tanbā'ī kā Safar* (Karachi: Fazli Sons, 1997?), pp. 61–8.

became unbearable, I grabbed my overcoat and dashed out to the park. The park was murderously quiet and a wretched silence hung over the atmosphere. I sat down on the roots of a tree, leaning against the trunk. I had a strange feeling that the tree hugged me, as if it were alive. This tree has been standing here for centuries. God knows how many people had come and sat down beside it like me. I have known this tree for the past thirty years. It's been a witness to my youth. I used to bring my girlfriends here. And today it's witnessing my old age. If only I could understand your tongue!—I said, looking wistfully at the tree in utter despair. Sher Khan, my tomcat—who used to listen to my ravings at such times, who was my intimate friend, my consoler and my comforter—had been dead for a month. He was a wise cat. We each knew every single habit and gesture of the other. I had seen smiles dance on his lips, and despair in his eyes. Cats talk, but they talk with their eyes. He and I used to talk through gestures for hours. The times when I'd be particularly down with melancholy, he'd sit near me and listen to me without blinking. Well, where Sher Khan is concerned, it's understandable that a person would talk to him because he was a living being, one who ate and drank and bounced around, and who was endowed with the faculty to observe, to listen, and to understand. But talking to a tree?—That, surely, was madness, sheer madness. And although for years I had often sat down on its roots I had scarcely ever imagined that a person could also talk to it. The tree is alive—I told myself—but is it also as full of life as Sher Khan? What difference does that make—I said to myself, feeling irritated. All I want is to vent myself a little after all. I'll leave after I've eased myself a bit, and nobody will be the wiser. And even if the wiser, what do I care! I looked around. There was no one near or far. Grabbing the chance I draped myself around its trunk and broke into inconsolable sobs: God, at least give me enough courage to kill myself! I can no longer find the strength to go through life sobbing and crying. How long will I have to endure this torture? God only knows what else I spewed out in a single breath.

Surprised by the words “Oh, sod off from here,” I flew and fell a few yards away from the tree. Who had spoken these words? I scanned the area with my eyes wide open. There was no one anywhere in the vicinity of the tree.

“You idiot!” the voice echoed again. It was the tree speaking. “What? You're talking!” I said to the tree in a crackling voice.

“What did you think? That only you know how to speak? The noblest among creation? My foot!” he said in a rage. “Why, we have nei-

ther speech, nor feelings, nor do we understand. Right? All these, God has bestowed only upon you.”

I quickly withdrew my foot from the root.

“Thank you,” the tree said, and continued, “It’s true that we trees aren’t in the habit of talking. You know why? Because talking breeds enmity. In bygone days, though, we did use to talk. But when these descendants of monkeys started to shoot off their mouths, and to consider themselves somebodies that could talk, we trees stopped talking. Let’s see, we thought, what all man can achieve by blathering that we can’t by keeping quiet. But now, today, after centuries, your utter stupidity has compelled me to break my silence. A few days of cold weather and there you go having fits of depression! A few clouds in the sky and you break into tears hugging the squirrels. For God’s sake, have you ever bothered about anyone other than yourself? Your entire world is no bigger than the cocoon that surrounds you!”

The tree paused for a brief moment and resumed: “You’ve no idea how fortunate you are. You can jump from a bridge and drown yourself if you like. Or put an end to your miserable life by hanging yourself with a rope. Or jump to your death from a window. But me, I can’t die, even if I want to. I can’t hang myself by a rope. God hasn’t even given me the right to call it quits at a moment of my own choosing. Do you realize I’ve been stuck in the earth right here on this spot for the last five hundred years? Don’t you think I sometimes feel like taking a stroll? To walk up to Golders Green Road? Or go to Brighton, strip off my leaves and loll about on the Nude Beach for a few hours. I long to have a sun tan too. But I have never, I repeat never, allowed myself to shed a single tear. Think about it. From the day I was born up till now I have never sat down to rest for a moment. Trees also have a desire to sit down and rest. Why do you humans think that we have no feelings? On cold wintry nights when you snuggle under the comfort of heavy quilts inside your homes and sleep a peaceful sleep, I stand out here, with my bare branches, shivering in the dark.”

“From the cold?”

“No, from fear,” he blurted out in a rage.

“What have you got to do with fear?”

“Why, indeed! Am I made of stone?” He paused, and then said, “Well, I shouldn’t say ‘stone.’ Because that stone, there ... he too is afraid.”

“Why?”

“He’s allergic to dogs. The other day he was saying that dog piss gives him rashes. But you wouldn’t know about that. It’s no fun standing here during icy-cold dark nights all alone.”

After that day I often went to the tree and talked to him. At least some of our thoughts were quite similar and we also enjoyed a kind of mental affinity. I’m not very religious, and he was not at all. He put absolutely no faith in religion. One day he said, “The entire park is religious except me. All these tiny medicinal herbs you see are religious. And that weeping willow over there, he’s the limit. In perpetual prostration. I’ve never seen him so much as lift his head a smidge. Maybe he’ll do it only after he’s had half of Paradise allotted to him.”

“So you think there’s nothing after death?”

“At least I *think* there isn’t, brother. And even if there *is* something, it certainly isn’t what these trifling herbs imagine.”

By now the tree had become bored so I said good-bye to him and left.

In the days that followed I became ill and left for Pakistan. I had intended to stay there for a month, but I became so absorbed in setting up an exhibition of my paintings and in other matters that I scarcely felt the passage of time, until a whole year had rolled away. On the return flight to London the passenger in the seat next to mine told me how a terrible wind storm in England had uprooted some half a million trees. I recalled having read something about it in the papers, but I was finding the number of fallen trees hard to believe. I remembered the “Tree” with concern. How I wish I hadn’t abandoned him! I thought about that for a while: even if I hadn’t abandoned him, what could I have done? I couldn’t have saved him. At most, I could have spent a few more days under the shade of his thick foliage. Then again, it was possible that it hadn’t been felled, that it still stood there swaying happily in the breeze.

When I approached the park, the tree was not there. Its place was occupied by a flower patch in the middle of which gardeners had planted a spindly young tree and secured it with a thick bamboo prop so that it wouldn’t bend over and break in an onslaught of ferocious winds. Overcome by sadness, I roamed aimlessly around in the park for quite a while, looking for all those trees the stormy winds had felled and obliterated. The entire park looked radically different. The soaring wall of stout white trees, which formerly stood behind the bandstand and seemed to pierce the clouds, had been completely wiped out.

One of the gardeners, whom I just barely knew, started telling me about the devastation caused by the storm as he turned over the earth with his shovel. He described how they had just removed the small, insignificant trees to one side and burned them and how the really big trees had been bought by furniture-makers and hauled away to be stored. “But *your* tree,” he said, “I remember vividly, was purchased by a small Birmingham company. I remember that well because I had myself had it loaded onto a truck. I doubt if anyone can locate it.”

I thought to myself that the gardener was talking about a matter scarcely two months old. I made a note of the company’s Birmingham address and returned home. I thought about the matter for a few days. “Look,” I tried to reason with myself, “it’s madness.” If anyone found out about it, they would surely think I’m crazy. But the craze didn’t abate. On the contrary, it became oppressive, until one day I found myself standing in front of that timber-yard.

“O.K., sir, now what are you going to tell them?” I asked myself. “That you want to look at the face of that dear departed tree? Well, you’ve managed to stay out of the loony bin so far, but don’t count on it. They’ll nab you and put you into one any day now. Suppose they asked you ‘Why?’ What possible answer would you have to give them?” And then, as if in a flash, I seemed to stumble onto a suitable answer. “I’m writing an article about that tree: the different stages it had to go through and how it ended.” The thought had barely hit me when I dashed into the office of the timber-yard.

“Oh,” jerking back a golden curl the blond receptionist said after I told her that. She then opened a register. Her finger moved across the lines and stopped at one. “Lot 17 ... We sold the biggest chunk of the tree to Mr. Collin Turner the sculptor.”

The next day I visited Mr. Collin Turner in his studio. He was busy sculpting a nude. I asked him about the lot. He scratched his bald head and said, “I think we made a Christ figure with Lot 17 and sold it to a church. But hold on, let me check.” After he checked, he scribbled the name and address of the church on scratch paper and handed it to me. I thanked him and left to look for the church.

It was a small, beautiful town. A lovely church stood some distance away from the residential area. The evening Mass had already ended. Although the last of the sun’s rays were still stretched out on the church’s roof, the shadows under the neighboring trees had darkened. I walked slowly through the main door and entered the hall. I dipped my finger into the font of holy water, bent my leg ever so slightly and crossed my

heart as my eyes looked straight ahead at the Christ. Picking my way along in silence, I approached the massive figure. Again I bent one leg and crossed my heart and then straightened up and stood next to an old woman. She was mumbling something. A little while later she tilted her head forward and bowed, and then she rose slowly and left. I raised my head for the first time and looked at the Christ. One of his hands was held out above my head and in his other hand he had a tall staff. With his half-opened eyes he seemed to be staring at the spot on the floor where I was standing.

The church was completely empty now except for the two of us. A dim light spread out around us. The glow of the lighted candles surrounding the Christ gave him an added aura of mystery. I extended my arm and placed my hand on his foot.

“So you’ve come,” he said.

A heavy bass voice crashed against the walls inside and then silence returned.

“Yes, my Tree.”

And as I said those words my eyes involuntarily spilled their cargo of tears. I grasped his foot tightly with my trembling hand. “But, didn’t you use to say that there was no hell or heaven after death?” I said.

After some time, when the tree didn’t respond, I lifted my head up and looked at it. A strange, mysterious smile was breaking on his lips ... the same smile found on Mona Lisa’s lips. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*