

NAIYER MASUD

Janus*

The world, unfortunately, is real.

—JORGE LUIS BORGES

I had a barn, I burned it down, what shall I do now?

Khirmanē būd marā, sōkbtam, aknūn ʿe kunam

—TALEB ʿALI KHAN (ʿAISHI)

SIGNS OF an approaching dust storm were in the air. The distant northern sky had turned darker and a faint whooshing could be heard. The wind had picked up but hadn't yet become erratic.

That night, again, I wasn't tired. Nevertheless I lay down on my bed and put out the light. The room's eastern door was open. It was darker inside than outside so the outside gloom entered as a faint glow. The fourth time I turned over, I was again facing the eastern door. A couple of steps in front of the door, under the open sky, my huge dog was sitting like a statue. I looked at him for a while. At the first signs of the coming storm, his ears had started to twitch every now and then. He was much larger than ordinary dogs. I laughed when I remembered that two years ago I had placed this very same dog in the pocket of my overcoat and brought him home.

"Hound!" I called out to him softly.

He remained seated and wagged his tail two or three times.

"Hound!"

He stood up, turned around in circles several times and then, after coming forward a little, began rubbing his body against the door. As a rule he wasn't allowed to come inside the room.

"Sit, good dog!"

* "Jānūs" appeared in the author's collection *ʿIṭr-e Kāfūr* (Karachi: Āj kī Kitābēh, 1999), 27–40.

The dog again turned around two or three times and this time he planted himself right up against the door. My room felt very secure to me, and now, for the first time, a sleepy haze began to cover my eyes. I turned onto my right side with my back to the door and removed my hand from under my head. My thoughts became incoherent. It was a sign of sleep. I opened and closed my eyes, but it wasn't until the incoherence of my thoughts had already dissolved into meaninglessness and even the meaninglessness seemed to be melting into darkness that I suddenly heard the sound of the dust storm somewhere close by.

"The storm is here," I thought. Then, even as this thought became meaningless and began to fade away, I heard the dog bark loudly behind me. It felt as though my eyes, my mind and my body had been scraped raw. I rolled over smarting and faced the door. I was annoyed at the dog, but the dog wasn't there now. He was headed down the stairs, barking, and the noise he produced going down made it clear that he had detected some sound and was heading straight toward it. Just then, something resembling a sheet of dust swooped down outside the open door and made the darkness there even thicker.

"The wind," I said to myself, "but I'm not intimidated by the elements."

The sound of the dog's yelp could be heard again downstairs, but this time it was somewhat tremulous and mixed with his peculiar whine.

"He's seen something," I thought. Just then, the storm assaulted the door with tremendous ferocity. The transom above the door fell open and some dried, withered leaves whirled in. They knocked against the south wall, rustling lightly against it, and fell onto the floor below. The dog's yelping was louder than all these other sounds. He was barking incessantly and each time his whine grew longer. I assumed he was competing with the wind but suddenly I thought I also heard a human voice. The sound of the dog became louder and I strained my ears. A deep, intermittent voice was definitely trying to silence the dog.

I jumped out of bed. I was familiar with the injuries a bloodhound could inflict. Who would be arriving at that hour? I didn't think about it because whoever was downstairs, his life was in danger. Just then I remembered that today I hadn't closed the door that opened onto the verandah, and the gate beyond the flower garden was still open too. I groped around for my sandals with my feet and, slipping them on quickly, started down the stairs.

"Hound!" I shrieked, "No, Hound!!"

On reaching the verandah, I called out to the dog again. I could see the gate in front of me. Someone had closed it. The dust storm wasn't

hitting the ground at the moment and the force of the wind was less at this level than overhead. Even so, the trees in the garden were bending downward again and again, and the wind was tossing their branches about. The open space outside the gate was very bright because that very week a strong milky-white light had been installed in the compound of Haji Zainuddeen, which made the shadows of the gate's iron bars stretch out all the way to the steps of the verandah. The dog was right in the middle of those dark streaks, barking nonstop and sending dust flying up with his hind legs. I called out to him. He looked in my direction and was beside me in two or three bounds. After circling me a few times he started to go back but I quickly went forward and grabbed his collar.

"Who's there?" I called out. My eyes were fixed on the area outside the gate. The dog was struggling to go toward it. I came down from the verandah and went a few steps forward with him.

"Who's there?" I called out again midway between the verandah and the gate, but no one was outside. Still I walked up to the gate and stood a while rubbing my hand on the iron bars. Then I turned toward the dog.

"Come along friend, let's go back," I said. "Someone must have been here, but because of you he just closed the gate and went away."

Taking hold of him, I headed back toward the verandah. Fresh leaves from the tree branches on my left were falling to the ground and dancing about. I looked up. It was a very tall, thin tree and its top stood right in the path of the wind. I became concerned that the storm might damage it, but then I remembered that such storms occurred several times a year and the tree had always withstood them.

The leaves raced here and there on the ground and I walked toward the verandah, but I stopped suddenly with a start. A new shadow had appeared on the ground between the dark lines cast by the gate. I clutched the dog's collar firmly, turned around, and looked back. Someone was standing there holding on to the bars. In the bright light that was coming from behind, he looked like a shadow himself. He was holding some luggage in his hands and resembled a black figure with a waist twice as wide as his chest.

"Who are you?" I asked without retreating, and the dog's collar slipped from my hand. He darted toward the gate barking. The figure quickly retreated several steps. I went forward and took hold of the dog's collar again.

"Who are you, sir?" I repeated loudly, but before even getting an answer, the dust storm descended and the first blast of wind slapped against the light sandy soil outside the gate stirring up sort of a spiral of dust. The figure disappeared behind it. Several gusts of wind came

swirling around from different directions, mixed with the dust of this spiral, and began twirling about. The wind had become erratic. When another gust blew the cloud of dust away from the front of the figure, he reappeared holding on to the gate. His hair was long and it was flying in the wind.

“Who are you, sir?” I reached out my hand and opened the gate a little. “Please come inside.”

As soon as the gate opened, the figure was alarmed again and retreated. The noise from the dust storm was now so loud that I was having difficulty hearing my own voice.

“Why don’t you come inside?” I screamed, and that time I got an answer.

“Please restrain the dog.”

“The dog won’t harm you, please come in.”

Taking hold of the dog, I started going toward the verandah. On the ground, the gaps between the dark lines of the gate narrowed. The newcomer was coming behind me slowly. After climbing the stairs of the verandah, I stopped and the newcomer caught up. The light from Haji Zainuddeen’s house grew dim by the time it reached the verandah, but despite the dim light it was apparent that this person was in a very run-down state. Even his clothes were in tatters, and his complexion was so dark that in the faint light his features couldn’t be seen clearly. In one hand he held some bedding tied with a cord and in the other there was a tin canister—it may have contained vegetable ghee at one time but had now been made more useful by adding a lid and fastener on one end. The newcomer wasn’t looking at me, all of his attention was focused on the dog.

“Where have you come from?” I asked.

“Will it bite?”

“No. Where have you come from?”

“I was looking for the Doctor Sahib.”

“That’s me.”

Then he greeted me and the manner of his greeting was not without courtesy. “Huzoor Doctor Sahib,” he said after a slight pause, “Jan Muhammad has sent me to you.”

“Jan Muhammad?”

“Who worked in your clinic last year. He met me in Kanpur.”

“What’s he doing in Kanpur? Come, let’s go inside.”

I opened the door of the drawing room adjoining the verandah and turned on the light.

“He works in a hotel,” the newcomer said as he came through the

door.

In the bright electric light he appeared even more run down, and the décor of the drawing room made his shabbiness so apparent that I stopped short as I was about to ask him to sit down on the sofa. The cuffs of his pajama were torn in several places and the sleeves of his *qamis* were threadbare. His hair was dangling slightly above his shoulders in clumps. The short thick beard on his dark skin made his face appear larger. That shabby man, with his broad bones and tall stature, certainly had an imposing personality. After some moments of silence he struck up a conversation.

“Jan Muhammad sends his salaams to you and begs forgiveness for leaving his employment without giving notice. Huzoor Doctor Sahib, he’s not a bad man. The 30 rupees he owed you, he has sent with me.” From inside the waistband of his pajama, he took out some bank notes wrapped in a piece of paper and gave them to me. “He asked me to give you the money as soon as I reached Lucknow. That’s why I’ve bothered you at such an odd hour.”

I was a bit surprised by Jan Muhammad’s honesty.

“Huzoor, if you would restrain the dog I’ll be on my way.”

“Right now the dust storm is rather fierce, sit for a while.” I pointed toward the sofa.

“Huzoor, I don’t want to trouble you.”

“It’s no trouble at all.” I again pointed him toward a seat on the sofa.

After hesitating for some time, the newcomer seated himself practically on the edge of the large sofa. His luggage was in his hands. Then he placed his bedding on his knees, his canister in front of him on the jute mat and glanced around the room for the first time. My eyes were fixed on him. There was something about the man that I couldn’t quite figure out.

“How do you know Jan Muhammad?”

“We were both working in the same hotel.”

“You work in a hotel too?”

“Not anymore.”

“What do you do now?”

He said nothing for some time, then he lowered his head and his voice became faint.

“Jan Muhammad had said, ‘Talk to the Doctor Sahib for yourself too. He will surely find you some work.’”

“Why did you leave Kanpur?”

“I didn’t like it there.”

“Where are you from?”

“From here, Lucknow. I was away for seven years, but Huzoor Doctor Sahib, Lucknow-wallahs just can't be happy anywhere else.”

“Where is your house here?”

“I don't have a house anymore. We lost our family home when I was in my childhood. My father died in the *sara'e* of Agha Meer. My mother moved to the almshouse of Tooriyaganj with me. When she died too, I left the city.”

At that point that dark-skinned fellow became drowsy. He mumbled something more which I couldn't make out, although my ear caught the words “the haveli of Navab Suhrab” and I asked, “What about the haveli of Navab Suhrab?”

“Huzoor Doctor Sahib,” the newcomer roused himself and said, “the haveli of Navab Suhrab has changed a lot.”

“Yes, Manzur Sahib bought it and had it repaired.”

“This Manzur Sahib ...,” he asked thinking, “he wouldn't be a navab, would he? Navab Manzur Ali Khan?”

“No, he's a merchant. His name is Manzur Shah.”

“Is he from here, from Lucknow?”

“I don't know for certain.”

“What is he a merchant of?”

“I don't know that for certain either?”

A long silence ensued during which the low, steady sound of the strong wind outside could be heard.

“This haveli of Navab Suhrab ...” The newcomer stopped in the middle of what he was saying. Then he added, “It was ours.”

I looked at him a bit amazed.

“Then our fortunes took a bad turn,” he said without expression. “My father's entire life was spent in the haveli, but he died in the *sara'e* of Agha Meer. I don't even remember what the inside of the haveli looked like. My mother told me ...” As he was talking he again grew weary and his head drooped.

I continued looking at him in silence.

“Huzoor Doctor Sahib,” he roused himself again and lifted his head, “the dust storm has subsided. Please restrain the dog. Tell me what time I should be here tomorrow.”

I noticed that his deep voice suddenly sounded a bit hollow. I also noticed that he was avoiding my eyes and seemed embarrassed when he saw me looking at him.

“If through Huzoor's kindness some work could be found ...” Grabbing his bedding in his right hand and lifting the canister with his left, he tried to get up from the sofa but couldn't. He tried a second time but

failed again. Finally, the third time, he pulled himself up and a slight sound escaped from his mouth. He quickly pressed his lips together to stop it.

Then I noticed that his body was shaking. “What’s wrong?” I asked getting up and going toward him.

“What?” he asked somewhat confused.

“You’re shaking.”

“No.”

“Sit down. You’re not well.”

“I’m perfectly fine, Huzoor Doctor Sahib. Please restrain the dog,” he said like an insistent child.

I decided it was best to let him go. I went close to the door and signaled the dog to go upstairs. He did so immediately. I turned toward the newcomer. “Okay,” I said, “come to the clinic tomorrow morning at nine.”

The newcomer took his leave and went out the door that led to the verandah. He glanced briefly at the stairs leading to the upper level and then went down the steps. After a few moments even his shadow had vanished from the verandah. I had barely put my hand out to switch off the light when what sounded like a thud came from outside. I was still wondering about the sound when I heard the dog bellowing on the stairs and then saw him take off from the verandah heading toward the flower garden. I also came out quickly and went down the verandah stairs. The shadows from the iron bars of the gate were stretching all the way to my feet and that man was lying on the ground in a black heap ten or fifteen steps ahead of me. His fall had stirred up a small cloud of dust that was still hovering around him obscuring the light from Haji Zainuddeen’s house. Silent but restless, the dog was sniffing the immobile man all over. As soon as he noticed me, he lunged toward me, yelping, and then raced back toward the body. Before I could reach there he made several circles between the two of us.

I went up close to the man and bent over. He was lying face down on the ground. His bedding had slipped from his hands but he was still clutching the hasp of the canister. The lid of the canister had come open and the light penetrated directly inside. It was empty. He was lying there in such a way that his right hand stretched out in front of him with his fingers curled under as if he was grabbing hold of the ground. Then his hand contracted and his body twitched two or three times. He let go of the canister and, pushing with both hands on the ground, tried to get up. His head and shoulders rose about two spans but then plunked back down. He tried to get up a second time so I bent down on one knee and

took hold of his arms. After a bit of jostling, he stood up, but there was no strength in his legs. He stooped over to pick up the canister with one hand and then sat down again.

"I'm feeling dizzy," he said, apparently to himself. His voice had now become very hollow. I put my hands on his waist and lifted him up. The canister also rose a little but then slipped out of his grip and dropped to the ground. The dog, continually circling around the two of us, darted over and began sniffing it.

"I was feeling dizzy," the newcomer said to me.

I supported him and helped him walk to the stairs of the verandah. As he was going up the steps he began to faint, and by the time I laid him down on the drawing room sofa, he was already completely unconscious and motionless. I had my doubts about whether he was alive. His dark face and hair were covered with dust. The fist of his right hand had opened and dirt was trickling out onto the jute mat.

I checked his pulse and then quickly went upstairs. The dog followed behind me. I took my stethoscope and went back down. After fastening the door of the drawing room from the inside, I turned around. The newcomer was still lying motionless on the sofa. While I was examining him he opened his eyes. They were glassy and blank. I looked closely at his face. His features were good. There were fine lines around his eyes, and if his dark complexion hadn't masked them he would have looked even older. On his face, his eyes were quite prominent and, lying in this condition—like a corpse, he appeared very contented and peaceful. Slowly he began to regain consciousness. His eyelids quivered. He tried to recognize me and succeeded, but when he attempted to get up he started to look distressed. I placed my hand on his chest gently and stopped him.

"Stay where you are," I said. "What's the problem?"

"I'll go," he said hoarsely and again tried to get up.

"You don't feel well at the moment," I told him and then repeated my question, "What's the problem?"

"Fatigue, dizziness, and ..." he paused and then said, "I really feel terrible."

I had finished my examination.

"Okay, stay there. I'm going to give you some medicine. You'll be all right."

I turned the door knob. Before opening the door, I swung my head around glancing at my patient and my hand froze on the knob. There was pressure on the door from the other side and it opened a crack. The dog's head poked inside and the sound of the wind could be heard distinctly. I

turned and walked over to the patient quickly.

“Tell me,” I said quietly bending over him, “what did you eat today?”

“Nothing.”

“Yesterday?”

He said nothing.

“Did you eat anything yesterday?”

Again he remained silent.

“How long have you been hungry?” I asked a bit sternly.

Apparently he didn't hear my voice.

“How long have you been hungry?” I asked again.

His eyes had lost their gleam but he was conscious. His purple lips were pressed together. This time I asked him very gently, “How long has it been since you ate anything?”

The patient didn't answer.

The dog had stuck his face inside the door, panting, and outside the wind was causing the empty tin canister to roll around. I stood quietly for some time and then went upstairs to my room. I tried to think about what I should do. I sat down on my bed, leaned against the bolster and tried hard to focus my mind. I felt my sandals falling off my feet.

The rustling of dried leaves falling through the northern skylight woke me. I sat up, put on my sandals and went downstairs. The drawing room door was fastened from the outside. I opened it and took a quick look inside. Then I went out through the open door of the verandah and down the steps. The iron gate was also open. I closed it and stood there for some time. The dust storm had picked up strength. I sensed the presence of the dog near my feet.

“Come along, my friend, let's go back,” I said to him and turned toward the verandah. After closing the verandah door, I went upstairs into my room.

As soon as I lay down on my bed, my thoughts became confused. One thought came out of my mouth, “He too wasn't intimidated by the elements.” Then this thought started to assume all kinds of forms.

“In any case, Janus, you didn't care to wait,” I said, and fell asleep. □

—Translated by Jane Shum and Muhammad Umar Memon