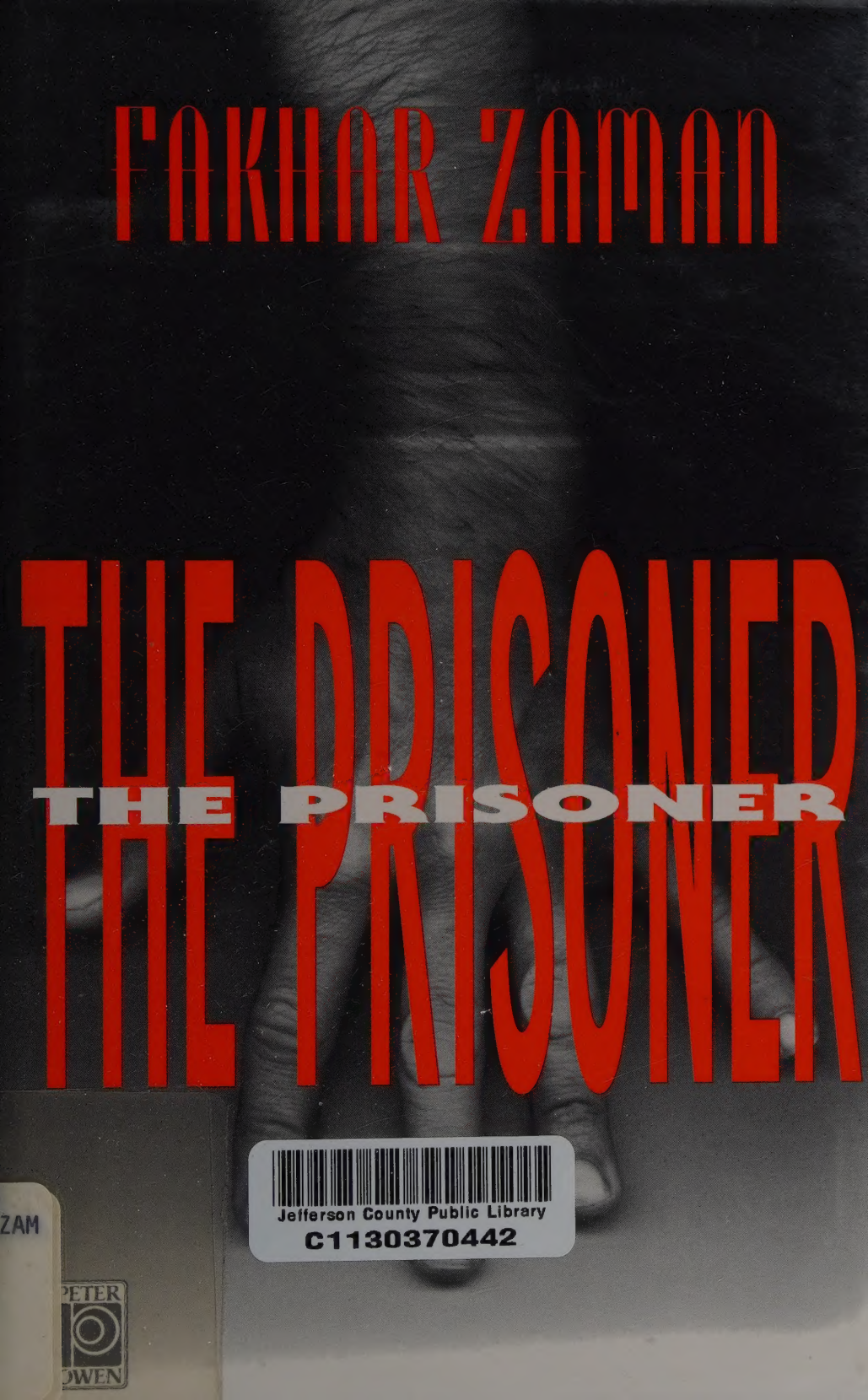
FAKHAR ZAMAN

THE PRISONER

THE PRISONER



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An unnamed prisoner – known to gaolers and inmates alike as 'Z' – languishes in a tiny cell for an unspecified crime. His days are measured out in lashes, as he is repeatedly ordered to confess his crime, or face the highest penalty. . . .

'Z's mistake is to have spoken out against the prevailing military government in Pakistan, and his eloquent poetry is the best defence for the prosecution. Gradually, however, 'Z' assumes the status of a hero in a drama in which the roles are subtly reversed: the accused becomes the accuser, the cruel and oppressive regime, the criminal.

This powerful political novel is a searing indictment of human rights violations, written by a journalist with first-hand experience of the atrocities it describes.

Translated from the Punjabi by Khalid Hasan

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The Prisoner

Fakhar Zaman

The Prisoner

A Novel

Translated from the Punjabi by
Khalid Hasan

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Translator's Note

All translations are an effort to re-create a work in a universe different from the one in which it was created.

There are two things a translator can do. He can try to render it in terms of exact verbal counterparts or, by exercising more freedom, attempt a less strait-laced version, while remaining faithful to the spirit of the original.

I have opted for the second choice.

The poetry with which the novel is interspersed is an integral part of its emotional and technical development. I have translated it in free verse without attempting the difficult – and often self-defeating – task of trying to find the right rhymes and metres.

Where I have found a particular passage difficult to render in English, I have left it out rather than take liberties with the original.

I would like to express my gratitude to Fakhar Zaman, the author, for the freedom he gave me in the accomplishment of, what has been for me, a labour of love.

And a word of thanks to my wife Juanita who read the first draft and provided extremely helpful editorial suggestions.

Khalid Hasan
Vienna, January 1983

Glossary

Bhagat Singh	Firebrand Punjabi revolutionary, member of the Ghadar Party, who was hanged in Lahore in 1931 for the assassination of a British police officer
Bulleh Shah	Punjabi mystic poet of the early 18th century
Dullah Bhatti	Punjabi outlaw and folk hero, hanged during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1542–1605)
Harrapa and Mohenjodaro	Sites of the great Dravidian civilization which flourished along the banks of the River Indus five thousand years ago
Heer	*See* Warris Shah
Jam Durk	Baluchi poet of the 18th century
Maulvi	In popular parlance one who leads prayers in a mosque
Mirza Sahiban	Popular Punjabi love epic
Mohammad Ram Singh Azad	The adopted name of the young revolutionary who in 1939 in London shot dead General Dyer, Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab at the time of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Amritsar in 1919. He was hanged in London
Mullah	Muslim scholar. The term is often used to describe an obscurantist
Pipal	Large shady tree, common to the Punjab and other parts of the subcontinent
Raaga	A particular musical scale constituting an Indian classical composition
Rahman Baba	Pushto poet of the 19th century

Saigal	Celebrated star and singer of the Indian cinema who is still popular, nearly forty years after his death
Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai	Sindhi mystic, poet and musician of the 18th century
Tansen	Great classical musician who lived during the Mughal Emperor Akbar's time
Thaat	Indian classical music is divided into ten thaats or sub-families of hundreds of raagas and raaginis, according to one classification
Warris Shah	Classical Punjabi poet of the early 18th century, celebrated for his love epic *Heer Ranjha*
Ahmad Khan Kharl Bola Kummar Chiragha Maachi Gumman Mann Jabroo Nizam Lohar	Six Punjabi outlaws of the later part of the 19th century who caught the popular imagination for their defiance of authority and their generosity to the poor

Preface

Oppression knows no limits, nor does suffering; tyranny is in proportion to the patience to endure. In fact cruelty begins to win when the capacity to resist wilts. That is when force triumphs and darkness devours lands.

But then comes a point in the history of shackled nations when defiance is born, to start with a tiny lamp flickering in the strong wind of suppression and gradually turning into an all-consuming fire. Those are the individuals who strike the spark and consecrate man's struggle against dictators and autocrats.

Such is the story of revolutions and revolutionaries. The price exacted is high. But posterity is a witness that there have been people who have paid it. Only oppressors have failed to learn a lesson.

This novel is about one such man who paid the price. He epitomizes the sufferings of man under tyranny all over the world; he could be from anywhere, anyone, Hindu, Muslim or Christian. Characters like gaoler, investigator or police superintendent in the book are too familiar to people who are ruled by bayonets; the names or religion of the perpetrators of cruelty do not matter.

What happens to 'Z', a prisoner who is eventually hanged, is a tale of all those who dare to fight oppression and challenge usurpers of power. It is an unequal fight; those who wage it have no weapon except a never quenching fire to be free, but their blood gives sustenance to the ideals of liberty, justice and equality.

'Z' represents the urge of man to roll back injustice and oppression, to get his due in an unequal society. His assertion is met with tyranny, as it happens under all climes. He is falsely implicated in a case of murder, arrested, tortured and brought before a Kangaroo court. He is sentenced

to death and hanged but not before he has exposed the mockery of the trial, the ambitions of the rulers and the tacit acceptance of the people.

The author feelingly captures in the book the sufferings of 'Z' in solitary confinement. He only senses the day dawning and fading away; he does not see the sun. Shut for days the only sound breaking the silence of his cell is the creaking of the door when it is opened or closed.

Every day is the same for 'Z'. At times it is impossible for him to bear the weight of idleness but he clings to the hope, a hope that rests on belief that the people have not lost faith in ideals. His faith burns bright as the days turn into weeks, the weeks into months and months into years. He loses count of time.

Much of the time 'Z' spends reciting the poetry he had once written or just thinking of betrayals around him. But how strong he feels diminishes as his flesh languishes at the hands of authorities, who punish him endlessly, even with lashes.

What does all this cruelty or oppression mean? Why is man pitted against man; nation against nation; religion against religion? Why is man the biggest enemy of mankind? 'Z' recites one of his poems:

One is called Rama Dass
Another Fateh Mohammad
And that is the old argument
But in the end
It turns out truth lay elsewhere
The Muslim is afraid to burn
The Hindu dreads the grave
But both perish

Before death 'Z' finds the answer. The ultimate truth lies in submerging one's ego into the ocean of service to mankind. The people come first since they are the reality. Man must die for new man to be born.

Will there be a new man? 'Z' despairs, but there remains a faint, persistent hope that he, nay, man, will again assert himself to be free from bondage. But what about unending cruelty and injustice?

Should man be crucified again and again? 'Z' says 'yes' and translates his views in a couplet by Bulleh Shah, a Punjabi poet:

If I speak untruth, I can survive
But if I speak the truth
It is explosive.

Men like 'Z' have to sacrifice themselves to cleanse the world of its tyranny and guilt. They are the morning sun which appears in the firmament after a long, dark night. But they like the sun have to go down in the horizon to rise again, to shine.

Kuldip Nayar
New Delhi, 20 January 1984

1

Grass does not grow on the gallows.
Winston Churchill

After my death, for the nation I shall still be the sun of their rights; my name will be the war cry of their struggle, the slogan of their hopes.
Napoleon

Law is a bourgeois restraint on the revolutionary masses.
The Peoples Daily, Peking

I accuse.
Emile Zola
Letter to the President of the French Republic on the Dreyfus Affair, 1898

The prisoner lay on the bare floor of his seven-by-eight-foot death cell, gazing intently at the ceiling as if trying to pierce through its concrete solidity to the vast canopy of the sky beyond. He had a feeling he could see the thin, white layer of cloud lined against its blue immensity. He lay like that for almost an hour, intent and motionless.

He was startled by the gaol clock striking the hour of six. He looked up at the ceiling again, solid and impenetrable. The illusion of light and cloud was now gone.

The prisoner dragged his body across the floor, placing his face exactly under a point in the ceiling from which drops of water fell when it rained. He was determined he would not blink his eyes unless a drop of water fell into one of them. There were no signs of rain outside. But he kept waiting.

Suddenly, it began to rain and with it, the ceiling began to leak like a sieve. But his eyes remained dry. It seemed that was one hole that had decided to remain blocked. In exasperation, he blinked his eyes and cursed the rain under his breath. And exactly at that moment, a drop of water fell on his face, missing his eye. This made him furious. Wiping his face with his hand, he rose from the floor, reeling a little.

To him that drop of rain-water was now one with his other oppressors. But he was not going to admit defeat. Dipping his finger in a puddle on the floor, he placed a drop of water in his right eye. 'I command the waters,' he exclaimed loudly. Then he laughed, gently at first and to himself; but soon he was doing so hysterically. His eyes began to water. 'The water in my body can wet my eyes. I need no gift from heaven. I am free to laugh or cry. I depend upon no one,' he said.

He began to count. There were only ten and a half hours to freedom, he thought. Freedom, freedom, freedom! He was now screaming, but whether with grief or joy, it was difficult to say.

On the day he was moved to the death cell, he had acquired a nightingale. He loved this bird wildly. He had managed to tie a small jingling anklet to one of its tiny legs and a string to the other which, in turn, was kept fastened to one of the bars of his cell.

The bird would hop around the cell, sometimes slipping through the bars, only to be pulled back. He did not wish it to obtain freedom, no matter how transitory. Mornings and evenings, the prisoner was allowed to stroll for an hour. He would always take the nightingale with him, untying its string and letting it perch on his shoulder. Sometimes he felt he was being cruel to the bird. What right did he have to deny it freedom? Wasn't he being selfish? Many times, he had decided to free it, but he was sure the bird would refuse to fly away because it had grown so

close to him. Actually, he was afraid of the loss of yet another illusion. What if he set the bird free and it flew off! He did not feel strong enough to take this risk. So he kept the bird his prisoner.

Sometimes, the bird would perch itself between the bars of his door, half in half out. Perhaps it knows I have only ten and a half hours to go, he said to himself and closed his eyes.

The gaol clock struck seven.

2

You are under arrest, certainly, more than that I do not know.

Franz Kafka
The Trial

If you don't tell me where he [Garcia Lorca] is hiding,
I'll take you away instead.
But he's not in hiding. He's gone out, that's all.
He's gone to read some poetry at a friend's house.

Ian Gibson
The Death of Lorca

The highest 'defender' of the province obtained his instructions on the restricted green telephone line from the 'defender' of the country. He passed them on to the 'defender' of the district to register a case of murder by conspiracy against 'Z'. 'How you do it is not important,' he said. 'If it involves a departure from routine, go ahead. I convey orders from above. "Z" is eminent among those who oppose us. It is essential that he be inextricably involved in this case. Get hold of all newspapers that support us. We want him accused of murder on the front pages. We want tearful stories written to convince the people that "Z" is not only the principal accused but the murderer.

Apart from that, we want a campaign of slander and vilification conducted against him. The plaintiffs should be told in confidence that we are on their side. We have many friends among journalists. Bribe them, the dirty dogs, and let them bark so much that every other voice is drowned. Make a case that will lead "Z" to the gallows. All the witnesses should be our hand-picked people. Make them approvers, if need be. "Z" cannot be allowed to escape. Everyone who assists in this effort will be promoted. "Z" will not be allowed a bail. That has been arranged.'

The 'defender' of the district conveyed these orders to the police. He told them where they had come from. The police moved. A case of murder by conspiracy was registered against 'Z'. He was arrested and brought in handcuffs to the remand court. He was made to stand for four hours in the front courtyard so that everyone should see and recognize him. People would pass in front of him, try to speak to him with their eyes, but would not dare get close to him. When the police were satisfied that enough people had seen 'Z' helpless in his handcuffs, he was taken to the police station. The journalists, true to their salt, duly filled page after page of their newspapers exposing the crimes of the principal accused.

'Z' would read their newspapers and feel amused.

The 'defender' of the province was beside himself with joy.

The green telephone never stopped ringing. Important people talking to other important people.

Everyone was happy. The orders had been carried out.

One man who was totally unconcerned in the midst of all this was 'Z'. If anything, he felt amused. It was all part of a big joke. To him, being handcuffed and publicly humiliated looked like a great honour. His detractors, he said to himself, were small men. They knew no better. In trying to belittle him, they were only belittling themselves.

At the police station, 'Z' was thrown into the lockup. His handcuffs were not taken off and, in fact, secured with a chain to the bars of the cell. 'Z' said to the police inspector, 'Why not shackle my feet as well?'

'We have to be careful with those accused of murder,' he replied.

There were eighteen other accused in the police station. Among them were murderers, dacoits, thieves and what are known as suspects. As evening fell, a man accused of being a cattle thief began to sing from Heer Warris Shah.

The ignorant and the untruthful have become counsellors
Wisdom and virtue have gone into hiding
To speak the truth is not the custom
Untruth has the world in bondage
Evil and unholiness direct all actions
Sharp is the oppressor's sword
There are no rulers and no ruled
We live in uncertain times
With every arm brandishing a sword

The police inspector suddenly appeared from nowhere. His staff stood to attention. The inspector looked at 'Z' in triumph. A faint smile spread across his face. The cattle thief had stopped singing. The inspector moved on. He took up his refrain, singing now of those who look like men of God but oppress His people; of the hypocrisy of judges who flourish in times of injustice; of the wrath of God which shall surely visit the cruel and the deceitful.

He sang with great feeling. 'Z' said to him, 'You stalk the earth at night to lift cattle. Why do you sing of Ranjha who tended the flocks of his beloved Heer?'

'Because Ranjha lives in my heart and if it be my destiny to have Heer taken away from me, then let me be a cattle thief,' he answered.

He continued, 'Ranjha was a coward. Heer was married to another man in his presence, but he did nothing. He then had his ears pierced, put a bowl in his hand and became a mendicant.'

'Z' did not interrupt him. He continued his discourse. 'Beware of Ranjha's betrayers. They have always been around.'

A man who was accused of murdering his unfaithful wife

now spoke, 'Leave Ranjha aside. The bravest of them all was Mirza. When he was told that Sahiban was being given in marriage to another man, he jumped on his horse Bakki and was on his way, disregarding the bitter wailings of his sister who begged him not to go. Mirza was a real man. Had sleep not got the better of him, Sahiban's brothers could never have surprised him so treacherously.' He said no more.

The suspect cleared his throat and began to sing the forlorn tale of Mirza:

Mirza says no warrior was born who could overpower me
The brave live in fear of my name
I will slash their proud heads with my sword
If in combat they face me

He sang with great feeling, his eyes closed, totally absorbed in Sahiban's address to her lover.

The men of God have found Mekkah
But I have found you
Take care, my beloved, you are at the gates of the city
The city of your enemies

Suddenly, he stopped singing. He looked at 'Z'. 'I know why you are here. I overheard the guards. Do you know they have decided to hang you?' He was silent for a few moments. Then he began to sing.

Wake up from your slumber, Mirza
Your enemies are upon you
Their swords are drenched in blood
They kill without pity

The guards were becoming restive. That was quite clear from their behaviour, but the man paid no attention to them. He kept singing about love and treachery long into the night.

3

These Christs that die upon the barricades
Oscar Wilde
Sonnet to Liberty

Thou art the ruins of the noblest man that ever lived in the tide of times.
Shakespeare
Julius Caesar

It had stopped raining. The ceiling was no longer dripping. 'Z' lay on his back, the nightingale resting on his chest.

The head warder walked up to his cell, a flashlight in his hand. He saw the prisoner lying motionless on the floor. From his experience he knew that condemned prisoners either spend their last hours in a state of semi-consciousness or become hysterical. They are unable to speak. They tremble uncontrollably. Dark circles appear under their eyes and their faces grow pale.

But this prisoner, he thought, was rather unusual. He showed neither fear, nor nervousness, nor any of the symptoms common to those about to die. This one appeared to be in complete control of himself. No last minute prayers, no signs of physical debility. Just lying there on the floor calmly. What could be the source of his peace? From what recesses of his being did his courage flow?

Did he think he would be saved at the last moment? He knew that most condemned men continue to believe that there

will be a reprieve, even when they are being marched to the gallows. The thread of hope refuses to snap even when the black hood is put around their heads. They can still see and hear. They are conscious of every noise, the smallest movement. They can hear the leaves rustling in the trees and the muted conversation of the gaol staff on duty. Their whole system becomes finely attuned to their surroundings. They can even hear the sound of silence with agonizing clarity. The most imperceptible movement appears to them like a movie run at breakneck speed. There is only one act which they see in slow motion, as it were. The hangman pulling the lever.

The head warder had witnessed several executions in his time. He had helped many prisoners walk up to the gallows. People behave unpredictably when they are about to be hanged. Some laugh boisterously, others break down completely. Some shout slogans and sing, while others become speechless with fear.

He knew that those who pretend to be brave are only trying to maintain their dignity, to convince themselves that they are not afraid. The truly brave ones are those who mount the scaffold, their faces radiant with an inner peace, an awesome equanimity which can only flow from their own truth.

The head warder kept looking at 'Z', who paid absolutely no attention to him. He pulled up a wooden stool that stood in the corridor and sat down on it leisurely. It was his duty to keep a watch on the prisoner so that he could be handed over to the law in a fit condition for the act of murder to be performed on him. His dead body could thereafter be handed over to his family.

The head warder often thought about these things. He found it strange that when one person killed another, it became murder, but death by hanging was considered both just and legal. The law killed men with the same ease with which the city authorities poisoned stray dogs. He knew that half the men who are hanged are innocent. What kind of a law is this which murders the innocent, he would ask himself. He knew of cases where thirteen had been hanged for the murder of one.

He remembered Sardara. His last words to his mother were,

'When they return my dead body to you, wrap a wedding garland around my head and take me out of the gaol like a bridegroom. I did not kill anyone.' Sardara was to have been married a day after he had allegedly committed the murder. His mother carried out her son's last wish. He was buried in his bridal attire. His mother and the girl who would have been his bride wept inconsolably. 'Justice!' they wailed. 'Is this your justice where the innocent are hanged!'

The assistant superintendent startled the head warder. 'Is the prisoner all right?' he asked.

'Flourishing,' he answered.

'What do you mean?' he said. 'Tell him to pray to God for forgiveness. Look at him. Lying there as if he were about to leave for his father-in-law's house.'

'Maybe that is where he is going,' the head warder whispered to himself.

The assistant superintendent stood around for a while, then moved on. The head warder drew himself close to the cell, wanting to pass on the assistant superintendent's advice to 'Z', but he felt tongue-tied. 'Z' looked at him and smiled. The head warder suddenly had a distinct feeling that the prisoner's face was bathed in a strange luminosity. But he could not bear to look at him for long. 'How is your little nightingale?' he finally asked.

'Happy. It will soon be free,' 'Z' answered, kissing the bird. The head warden felt a lump in his throat. He moved back.

A strange man to be in a job like this, 'Z' said to himself.

The gaol clock struck eight.

4

> The Dreyfus Affair is one of the thousands upon thousands of tricks of the reactionary military clique.
>
> Lenin

Since his handcuffs were fastened to the bars of his cell, 'Z' found it difficult to move around. Not more than a few feet in a circle.

He would sit with his back against the wall, staring at the ceiling or the wall in front. It was his left hand which was shackled, so the right one was free. When he tried to stretch the arm that was chained, he found that he could not go too far without feeling the chain grow taut. That was painful, the steel cutting into the flesh. Once in exasperation, he flung his arm violently on the floor. The pain was excruciating and he could see blood. He wanted to see the bruises on his left wrist. He tried too many times but he was so tightly handcuffed that he could see nothing. It is silly to want to do that, he said to himself. He even chuckled, hoping no one had seen him do that. He would have hated to be laughed at. Although, at that point in time, he did not really care who saw him do what.

I am alone in prison, he thought. The others do not matter. They exist outside this cell, this gaol, me. He began to count the beams on the ceiling. There was one main girder and eight cross beams. He counted them once, twice, thrice, first by looking

at them, then by memory and then on the fingers of his left hand. There were four ventilators in the cell, two in the east, two in the west. Each ventilator was protected by a grill, six bars in a straight line.

His cell door had nine bars. He counted them, first on his left then on his right hand. He closed one eye and counted them. Then he counted them with the other eye closed. This went on for some time. He lifted his index finger and ran it along the length of each bar. Every time he did that, the bars disappeared. This seemed to delight him greatly. One little finger of mine can dissolve steel, he thought. He was feeling a new surge of confidence. This is all an enormous joke, he said. I am free of my chains and shackles, free of the restraints they have put me under. I am stronger than my captivity. They cannot break me. He moved his left arm. The chain rattled loudly and kept rattling even after he had stopped. That made him feel good. And strong.

'Z' remembered his second day in the police lockup. The other inmates had told him about torture. The cattle thief had been beaten so severely on the soles of his feet that the flesh had cracked in several places. There was a fracture in one arm. But he had never confessed. Another thief had told his interrogators, 'You can touch my body with live wires, push chilli powder up my orifices, coat me with melted sugar and leave me lying on an ant hill, stretch me across a slab of ice, hang me upside down or what you will, I shall never tell you where the goods I stole are hidden.'

Another accused, whose body was full of boils from cigarette burns, had also refused to confess. 'Z' felt enraged. He wished he had a machine-gun with which he could fire round after round into the bodies of all uniformed men who take away people's freedom. But he felt helpless. He could not do it alone anyway. It would require power and unity and people. But that day will surely come. Of that there could be no doubt.

Suddenly, there was a surge of activity. People were running. The guards, the police inspectors, the minor functionaries.

The 'defender' of the district was expected any minute. He

was going to have a little talk with 'Z'. The inmates began to hurl abuses at the police and their masters, including the ultimate 'defender' of the country.

A white jeep drove into the courtyard, disgorging the district 'defender', a middle-aged, white-haired, puny little man. The policemen were saluting him wildly, then bowing down to touch his feet. The men in the lockup began a chorus of abuse.

Son of a bitch!
The bastard!
I'll sleep with your mother, you spectacled cad!
I'll sleep with your mother, you pimp!
You drunken reciter of holy verses!
You offspring of a prostitute!
Your mother . . .
Your sister . . .
Your wife . . .
Your daughter . . .
You mother fucker!
You sister fucker!
You pimp seed!

'Z' heard this torrent of abuse from the inmates who were all watching him, perhaps hoping he would join them. Then they heard him. 'This man is only a petty functionary of the system and unless you change that system, no amount of abuse will help. You are merely polluting your tongues. Why abuse this dog then? Why not eliminate the entire despicable pack which has been ruling us for so many years?'

The bearded orderly of the district 'defender' carried his prayer mat, hubble-bubble, ablution jug and briefcase from the jeep to the office where the 'defender' was already installed in a chair. A few minutes later a guard came and ordered 'Z' to accompany him. He tied the chain dangling from 'Z's handcuffs to his belt and marched him into the room where the district 'defender' was waiting. He surveyed 'Z' carefully, from head to toe, then asked him to sit down. 'Z' sat down. The 'defender' took a long drag at his hubble-bubble, emitted the smoke stylishly through his mouth and nose and said, 'You

have had to be put in the lockup for which I am sorry. These things date back to the time of the British. After independence the government just has not been able to attend to the improvement of police stations and their lockups. For each inmate's upkeep, we are given only fifty paise by the government and we have to provide all facilities within that limit. We cannot, of course, take any chances with those accused of murder. And though we know that you will not run away, legal formalities, I am afraid, have to be fulfilled.'

'What law and what formalities?' 'Z' asked. 'The law made by the British to put away innocent people in gaol, to sentence them to life, to hang them on the gallows! Let's not talk about law. It is no more than a toy in your hands, a weapon with which you destroy poor and innocent people. Let's not talk about it. But tell me how much did they pay you to make this false case against me? Fifty thousand, a hundred thousand, or is it going to be a promotion?'

'You are making very serious allegations. I have spent my time in public service as an honest officer. I have nothing but contempt for those who allow themselves to be bribed,' the 'defender' said. He paused, opened his briefcase, perhaps feeling an urge for opium to which he was addicted. But he seemed to change his mind.

He started to speak again. 'We are faithful to the government of the day. Until yesterday, your friends were in power and we carried out their orders without questioning them. Today, others rule the country and we have to do their bidding.'

'Did those who rule us today instruct you to involve me in this murder case?' 'Z' asked.

'You were accused by the plaintiffs. We had no option but to arrest you,' the 'defender' replied.

'Tell me the truth. Were you not told by the powers that be that since I belong to a group which apposes them and I write poetry against their oppression and injustices, I should be involved in a murder case?' 'Z' asked.

'I am the head of the district administration. I am not answerable to you. I am here to record your statement. You are at

liberty either to write it out yourself or dictate it to one of the police officers. I would advise you, however, that you should speak the truth,' he said to 'Z'.

'Indeed,' 'Z' answered, 'since you yourself have spoken nothing but the truth. But tell me, what sort of a statement do you wish me to make? Do you expect me to beg you and your masters to spare me because I am innocent? Well, let me tell you this. I do not consider you competent to accuse me of this or that offence. You have no right to sit in judgement on my life and conduct. I have no faith in you or your institutions. You are free to accuse me of what you like. You are free to blacken my name in your newspapers. You are free to try me in your special courts. You can do nothing to me because I live in the hearts of the masses. I will always remain a star of hope for my people. And you, you will be no more than vermin to the coming generations.'

The district 'defender' was suddenly very angry. He banged his fist on the table. The police inspector came running into the room. 'Throw him back into the lockup. He refuses to have his statement recorded. Well, he will regret it. We wanted to help him like gentlemen but it seems he is still intoxicated with the power he and his ilk have lost.' The 'defender' was fuming at the mouth.

'Sir, just permit me to record his statement,' the police inspector said. 'How can an accused refuse to have his statement recorded? It is what the law demands and what we must ensure as police officers, but if he decides to maintain his silence, it will mean that he has confessed his guilt. Suits us so much better.'

'Z' stood up. A constable stepped forward and shoved him roughly towards the lockup.

The district 'defender' said to the inspector, 'Draft his statement yourself but take every care that it leaves no loopholes. I want an open-and-shut court case.'

'Yes, sir, God willing,' came the reply.

The inspector closed the door and placed thick wads of money on the table. 'Sir, please put it in your briefcase. The money

obtained from the plaintiffs, I have already passed on to you. This little gift comes from the local Maulana with a message: "Z" must hang.'

The district 'defender' returned to his office, picked up his white telephone and informed the provincial 'defender' of the day's happenings. The latter immediately picked up his green telephone and briefed the highest 'defender' in the land. Many green telephones rang that day.

The next day, 'Z' was produced before a court and a judicial remand obtained, after which he was sent to jail. Many people who knew him or recognized him, watched him silently in police custody. They said to themselves:

'Z' is not a murderer. He is a poet.
'Z' is being punished because he loves the poor.
'Z' is being arraigned for political reasons.
'Z' is in their hands because he wrote for the people in their language.

But there were many who were happy, among them mill owners, landlords, bureaucrats who wore summer suits, black-marketeers who had performed many pilgrimages to Mekkah, Mullahs and smugglers.

5

> Must then a Christ perish in torment in every age to save those who have no imagination?
>
> Bernard Shaw

When 'Z' was brought to the gaol, a guard undid his handcuffs. Where the steel had cut into the flesh, the blood had congealed. 'Z' rubbed his wrist and a few drops trickled out. His name and particulars were entered in a register maintained for this purpose in the gaol office and he was immediately moved into the main compound. All prisoners who entered the compound had to do so through an opening in the big door separating it from the office area. The opening was low and they had to bend to go through, another British tradition. Those entering prison could not be allowed to hold their heads high. The successors of the British had maintained the tradition. The opening was called the wicket gate.

'Z' was searched before he was allowed to go through the wicket gate, another time-honoured device to humiliate the prisoner. He had nothing on him. The guard frisking him was a bit surprised. He expected a man as famous as 'Z' to have his pockets full of valuables. It was another matter that all that was of value lay in his soul, not his pockets. The guard pulled out a cigarette from a packet and said, 'Do you smoke?' 'Z' felt a surge of anger but decided to keep quiet. He knew by now that it was the custom to try to provoke the prisoner by hurling

little insults and indignities at him. He must not play into their hands.

'Z' was greeted like a hero inside. Everyone knew who he was and why he had been charged with murder. The barrack in which he was kept the first night had about sixty inmates. They were all new arrivals who were to be inspected the next day. 'Z' sat down in his corner and one by one the inmates came to him, saying how sorry they were that he had been framed. He felt these so-called criminals were far more moral than the pious ones living in freedom.

'Z' told them, 'I speak in the language of the people of this province. I write books in that language. They wish to destroy me because I speak for the people in their own words. The press has vilified me because it has sold its soul. There are journalists who have been bribed to invent stories against me. I am going to be tried by a specially constituted court. Orders have been received.'

They asked him many questions. 'Z' said in answer to one, 'What help can my fellow writers render! Most of them lack courage, especially the older ones. They are impotent, a bunch of hypocrites. They write poetry and they write fiction, but show them a policeman and they start to tremble with fear. They have never shown any hesitation in licking the boots of the powerful. All they are interested in is saving their skins, their jobs. Honour, courage and integrity exist only among the new and younger writers. They are doing what they can, but you cannot fight machine-guns with ballpoint pens. Our writers are not yet ready to pick up machine-guns, though that time is not far.

'The law is blind. There are those who dispense justice, like goods for sale. Everything is on auction in our society: army officers, civilian bureaucrats, politicians, judges, mullahs. What is to become of us! We have to change the system. That day shall come and we must await its dawn. The power of the people cannot be resisted forever. Our people will one day rise. In the battle that is looming, everyone will be a soldier. It will be a battle for victory.'

'Z's words seemed to have sent a shiver of excitement through

his listeners. Now he knew that they were his people and they would be his soldiers in the crusade he had launched.

It was midnight. The silence was broken by the plaintive voice of a prisoner.

Ranjha forsook the world
And I, the world with him
Now I walk the earth in loneliness
Unknown to the wayfarers
Why did my lover forsake me?

'Z' fell asleep at some point.

The next day, the head of the barrack, who was a lifer and was known as *lambardar*, informed 'Z' that the superintendent – always called *burra sahib* – or his deputy, the assistant superintendent, *nikka sahibs* – would come for an inspection of the inmates.

'Z' was made to sit on the ground with others and warned to keep his eyes down when the officers arrived. It was the *burra sahib* who eventually turned up. Each inmate was presented one by one.

This one here is a thief.

This one abducted a woman.

This one was drunk and disorderly.

This one is an adulterer.

This one was caught committing an unnatural act with a boy in a mosque.

This one threw acid in his wife's face.

And so the inspection continued. Anyone rash enough to look up when presented, was summarily caned by the warders who formed the *burra sahib*'s retinue. Some were made to hold their ears threading their arms through their legs. Some were smacked across the back with the 'chittar', a particularly painful torture instrument made of reinforced leather. Thieves were invariably beaten, as were abductors. Those involved in more than one case fell under the 'dangerous' category and were kept chained like animals. There was one thing, however,

that everyone received without distinction: ample and intimate abuse from the superintendent and the guards.

The *burra sahib* looked obviously pleased when 'Z' was presented. An important man was now at his mercy.

'He is here for murder,' the head warder said.

'I know. Seen it in the papers,' the *burra sahib* observed, casually lighting a cigarette. 'Put him in barrack "A". Have him wash and paint the gaol walls.'

'Z' said nothing. He did not wish to protest his innocence. He thought he should wear a placard round his neck saying 'I am innocent'. But did it matter? He knew that he was not a murderer and that was enough. What did these people matter? Who were they anyway to act as his accusers?

After the inspection was over, 'Z' was produced before the gaol doctor. He was weighed and measured and given a ticket, number 786. It contained all the information about him. Name, parentage, date of incarceration, caste, education, offence, domicile, etc. I should design my own ticket, he thought, which should read:

Number	786
Date of incarceration	July, 1977
Name	Not yet given
Parentage	Being investigated
Caste	Dates back 5,000 years to Harrapa and Mohenjodaro
Education	Have unlearnt my learning
Domicile	In the hearts of the people
Offence	To be checked with Kafka's Joseph 'K'
Weight	Lighter than a straw, stronger than steel
Age and date of birth	30 years, born 1947
Date of next hearing	The morning of the red sun

'Z' was allotted a corner in barrack 'A'. He spread his gaol blanket on the floor, but he had hardly sat down when a warder ordered him out. 'You are not here for rest and recreation. Follow me,' he barked. 'Z' was handed a bucket. His job seemed to consist of filling that bucket with water and drenching the

gaol wall with it. Another inmate had been assigned the task of painting it with mud and clay. How long can this wall stand, he thought, as he threw another bucket across its face.

There were at least one hundred under-trials in barrack 'A'. Those sentenced and serving terms were kept in separate barracks. The under-trials are in a state of suspension. Their cases have yet to be decided and that can take years. In murder cases, the accused can be in detention for as long as five years. If he is finally acquitted, the time he has already done is like so much water under the bridge. If he is sentenced, the time spent in detention is not adjusted against the term awarded by the court. British laws, which it had never occurred to the new rulers to change.

In barrack 'A', 'Z' met under-trials whom the courts had agreed to bail out but who were still there. No one had come forward with a bail. There were others booked on offences where the maximum sentence did not exceed three years, but they had been languishing in detention for over four years. All day the under-trials were made to do 'fatigue', an army term for physically demanding work. Every morning the barrack was unlocked and the inmates counted. Their names were called out and to confirm their presence, they had to shout their father's name.

Rehma, the warder would scream.

Son of Lal.

Jeera!

Son of Mohammad.

Ahmoo!

Son of Hussain.

Sharifa!

There was no response. The bearded warder screamed, 'Have you forgotten who your father was?'

'Mohammad Khan, Mohammad Khan,' Sharifa stammered.

'Oh! I see, son of the great Khan. Ha, ha, ha!'

'Z' waited for his name to be called.

'"Z"!'

He did not answer.

'"Z",' the warder said again.

He still did not answer. The warder was furious. 'Are you a bastard that you do not know who your father was?'

'I want to be known by my own name because I am a witness to myself and my existence.' 'Z' said quietly.

The warder did not understand. 'Then don't talk like a bastard,' he shouted.

'All of us here are brothers,' 'Z' replied. 'Our mother was raped by so many men in power that we have forgotten who implanted our seed in her womb. Can you, for instance, say with certainty that you are the son of the man who married your mother?'

The warder did not understand what 'Z' was saying, though he pretended that he did and continued the roll call.

This exercise was being repeated in all the other barracks. When the head count was complete, the gaol bugle was sounded, signifying that all was in order.

In the evening, the inmates were counted again like sheep and pushed into their barracks.

That night 'Z' thought of a poem he had written once. It was called 'Illegitimate Children'. The government of the legitimates had declared it obscene and banned it.

These are the bastard children
Of the mother ravished by the mighty overlord
To assert his manhood
And tickle his fancy
One day he left her
And to this day, our gentle mother
Has continued to be ravished
Her violaters have not changed
Her children are all bastards
But a day will come
When our father
The husband of our comely mother
Will answer our prayers
And come to free us
A day will come

6

> Who will be there after me to save the thousands of the bravest from the scaffold?
>
> Napoleon

> Man is a mortal that may be; but let us die resting; and if our lot is complete annihilation, let us not behave in such a way that it seems justice.
>
> Albert Camus

The prisoner lay in his cell, staring intently at the naked bulb in the ceiling. It was a kind of challenge. How long can I look at it without blinking my eyes, he thought. One minute, two, three. His eyes began to water. Involuntarily, he blinked. Then he started again. He felt as if his eyes were melting in their sockets. He could see not one but two blobs of light now. He discontinued the exercise.

He was conscious of the thick walls of his cell, but now they appeared to him no thicker than onion peels. He cried in anguish, scaring the nightingale. The string was now all tangled up. He got up and carefully straightened it out. He felt he was a boy again, flying kites. He remembered the day he had won a kite-flying match. His kite had been cut away by a rival kite. He was determined to avenge it. He did not have much string left, only bits and pieces, but he knotted them together.

He launched the kite, but found that it listed to the right. It

needed to be balanced. He pulled it back and fastened a tiny rag to the left corner and it was up in the air again. The kite was now flying beautifully, perfectly balanced.

His rival kite was up in the air too and coming dangerously close. It was bigger than his and being flown with the aid of a specially glass-treated string. There was only one way he could win. He had to take advantage of his knotted string. With great dexterity he managed to get on top of the other kite and made his kite plunge suddenly, entangling the string of the other with his. Then he pulled furiously and suddenly the pressure on his hand lightened. The other kite had been slashed away from its string. He whooped with joy.

The rival kite was gently drifting towards the ground, over house and tree tops. His rivals were furious. They did not expect this urchin with a knotted string to slash away their kite. They challenged him to another contest. They went and bought new and stronger string. They ordered a big kite, a *gudda*.

'Z' prepared his own string, treating it himself with a home-made preparation to give it the cutting edge he would need. He bought a new red kite. Green was the colour of the rival kite. There was much excitement in the neighbourhood over the coming match. But when the time came, the match was a brief one. Almost within seconds, he had slashed away the rival kite.

He did not bring down his kite after cutting away the green kite of his rivals. He let it soar in the sky, higher and higher. There was pandemonium among them now. 'He has not played fair. He has used underhand tactics. He has used imported string.' They pounced on him, snatching the string from his hands in trying to bring his kite down. In the ensuing mêlée, the string broke. His kite was so high now that you could hardly see it, but when the sun caught it, it shimmered like a red star. Many people stood in the streets watching it fly with such ease and magnificence. 'We will never let this red kite come down.' they said. He felt ecstatic, although his fingers were bleeding and his body ached with the blows he had received.

The prisoner walked up to his door. He placed his face against

the bars and tried to look out at the sky, as much of it as he could see. He saw a cascade of light. It was a shooting star. It looked like his red kite somehow. 'Will the people who urged that red kite to soar into the skies ever let it come down and be trampled under jackboots?' he asked the nightingale.

The bird shrugged its wings.

The gaol clock struck nine.

7

Every prisoner has believed that outside his
walls a free world exists; but now the
prison has become the whole universe.

Bertrand Russell
Autobiography

I know not whether the laws be right
Or whether laws be wrong
All that we know who lie in gaol
Is that the wall is strong
And that each day is like a year
A year whose days are long

Oscar Wilde
The Ballad of Reading Gaol

No child, no sire, no kin had
No partner in my misery
I thought of this, and I was glad

Byron
The Prisoner of Chillon

'Z' had picked up the gaol idiom now, its own special jargon. In the beginning, he had found much of it incomprehensible. *Khaddaywal* was an inmate who slept next to you on the floor. *Handiwal* was one with whom you cooked and shared food, illegally prepared on a stove in the barrack. He was also called *pateeliwal.*

Muqqudamewal was a co-accused, although everyone here was accused of something or other. *Panjisala* was one sentenced to life imprisonment. Formerly, life imprisonment was fourteen years but it had been raised by eleven years. One *panjisala* used to say that those outside had a harsher term to serve. When the *burra* or the *chotta* sahib came on an inspection, it was called *daura*. 'The *daura* has passed' or 'the *daura* is expected', was how the inspections were described.

The *daura* was a gaol institution. The ostensible purpose was to see that the cells were clean and that the inmates had the necessary 'facilities'. If a certain barrack was to be inspected, the inmates were made to squat in front of it in neat rows, their eyes down. They were not supposed to make the least movement. If someone had a complaint, called *sawal*, or question, he could make it, but at his own risk. If it turned out to be against one of the gaol staff, there was a heavy price to pay later. The inmate would be taken away and beaten severely. After the *daura* was over, the prisoners were shunted back into their barracks and cells. Now they could feel free for a week since the *daura* was a weekly event. Everyone possessed something which was not allowed under gaol regulations, such as playing cards, newspapers, transistorized radios, vegetables and food or butter. As long as the lower gaol was kept happy with bribes, there was no problem.

'Z's *khaddaywal* had been in detention for four years. He was accused of murder but the case had not yet come up for hearing. Like all old inmates he knew exactly which parts of the gaol were going to be inspected on what day and when. Barrack 'A' was inspected on Tuesdays.

Tuesday is hard on lovers
In the middle of the river
I fight the furious currents
Then I see her
Standing on dry land
She laughs as my struggle continues
Perhaps she finds it amusing

But I wait
For a look, a few words maybe
Before the waters pull me down

There was another gaol term, *panja*. It meant labour. There were many kinds. *Murramat panja* meant repairing things of all kinds. *Karkhana panja* was being put to work weaving carpets and broadlooms. These goods were sold at 'set prices' to army and civilian officers and the gaol staff. *Bahar da panja* involved work outside the gaol compound, generally of a menial kind in the lush lawns and fruit gardens of gaol officers. The prisoners picked out for such work were made to wear a ring around their ankle, much like military officers wear stars and medals for identification. The gaol had farmland which was tended by the prisoners. There were wheat threshers and other implements in the gaol which were also worked by the prisoners.

There was a category of prisoners who were called *tareekhi*. These were men who were serving full sentences without the benefit of any mitigation. They were always men of fierce pride. 'Z' had met a lifer who had done fourteen years for murder. Normally, with remissions, a man can get out in eight or nine, but this one had sought no favours. He was headstrong. If he had complaints about gaol food, he would go on hunger strike. If they tried to overwork him, he would slash himself with razor blades as a protest. He had been caned and beaten repeatedly, but he had refused to admit defeat. He was greatly admired for his resolution and courage. Other prisoners envied him and confessed that they were too timid to emulate him. They wanted to get released and rejoin their families. 'Z' said to himself: to undergo the ordeal of imprisonment like this man is preferable to obtaining release as a favour from puny men.

There were other terms. *Ghar-khorakiya* was used for those inmates who were permitted to have food sent to them from outside. In the gaol hierarchy, they occupied a higher social position than those who were fed at the gaol *langar*, or communal kitchen. These people, who were always under-trials, were seldom called upon to do manual labour. The others were made

to work more because the gaol authorities felt that since they were being fed by them, it was only fair that they pay for their keep in some form. Since 'Z' was fed at the *langar*, he was, therefore, made to do hard manual labour. Once a person was sentenced to be hanged, he was immediately moved to a death cell. This was called *kothi lagna*. The death cell was a cubicle, eight by ten feet, or less. When a higher court commuted the death sentence or turned it into transportation for life, it was called *kothi tutna*.

'Habitual' was a prisoner who had been to gaol more than once to serve a term. Such men were always kept in chains or shackles. Once 'Z' asked a pickpocket why he returned with such regularity. 'Because I have no one in the world. When I find no food or shelter, I manage to get arrested and sent here. At least, they give you food and a sort of home.'

Qasuri chakki was the name given to the punishment cell where prisoners or under-trials who had infringed the regulations – perhaps by answering back an official – were thrown in. Its doors were always kept locked, the inmates being fed through the bars. A clay pot filled with sand served as the W. C. It was ironic that the cell should have been called *qasuri* – *qasur* meaning guilt – when almost everyone sent here was innocent.

The variety of the gaol's verbal shorthand was endless. *Patra chalana* meant to circulate a rumour. The twenty-two foot outer boundary wall of the gaol was called *kot moqah*. Prisoners of long standing had some privileges, one being to do a sort of guard duty at night by walking along the edge of the wall and occasionally shouting the watchman's eternal warning 'keep awake'. Every watchman had his beat. There were small alcoves in the wall at regular intervals. If there was a piece of information to be passed on, one of the honorary watchmen would jot it down on a piece of paper and place it in the alcove. The next man would pick it up at the end of his beat and leave it in the next alcove. In a short time, the news would be all over the gaol. Often, it turned out to be no more than wishful thinking or simply an unconfirmed rumour. But it was a kind of gaol newspaper, although it had so often been proved to have circulated

totally baseless stories of bails being granted, of imminent releases and sentences, none of which turned out to be true in the end.

A *Hawaii* hearing was one where the accused were taken to the court in handcuffs or chains. 'Z' would watch them returning at the end of the day and wonder when the *Hawaii* hearing the masses of his country had already called for would take place. When will the case of the people be heard at the bar of history?

Roonumai hearing was one where the under-trials had to be physically produced before a judge every fourteen days to obtain what was called a judicial remand. The formality was not always observed strictly. Often, the reader of the court would grant a remand without the accused actually being produced in court.

There was a court lockup where those up for a hearing would be made to squat on the bare floor in their chains and handcuffs. The judge often remained in his retiring room and signed a piece of paper at the end of the day to meet the law's requirements. The important thing was not justice but the appearance of justice being done.

Much whipping was carried out in gaol and the whippers were often chosen from amongst the inmates. There were always some vicious characters around who did not mind the assignment. An inmate who has been ordered to be whipped received what was called a *qasuri* whipping. If it was an *adalat* or court which had awarded the punishment, it was called *adalti* whipping. Special military courts, which were quite generous in handing out this punishment, especially to *siyasi* or political prisoners, were said to have ordered *fauji* – army – or *siyasi* whipping.

'Z' had seen newspaper pictures of men being flogged and he was sure his turn would come before long. The only question was what kind of lashes they would award him: *qasuri*, *adalti* or *fauji-siyasi*?

Udthi inmates were those with more than one criminal charge against them. They were either kept in a separate barrack or

moved from barrack to barrack every week. They were never allowed to remain in one place for long, hence the term *udthi* – flying. When 'Z' first heard the term, he thought it had something to do with flying. Then he laughed. If these poor wretches could fly, he thought, they would be over the gaol wall in the twinkling of an eye. He wished he could put a pair of wings on every inmate.

Since 'Z's arrival in gaol, nobody had come to visit him. Those who had tried had been disallowed by the authorities, a warder had told him. So, he was a bit surprised when one day he was informed that he had a visitor, a *mulaqat* in gaol language. He had been working since morning, his hands caked with mud, but he washed them clean and began to walk towards the small courtyard at the front of the gaol where meetings were allowed to take place. The meetings were not really physical, in that the inmate and the visitor were separated by a wooden door with grilled openings. They could see each other and hear each other's voices, but they could not touch hands.

When 'Z' arrived, the place was full of inmates and visitors, each on his side of the dividing line. Since hands could not be shaken, the visitor and the inmate would place them against the grill in an almost abstract, symbolic gesture. 'Z' thought when they did that, they were trying to accomplish more than a ritual. The prisoner tried to imbibe through this almost physical contact a bit of the freedom that lay outside the walls of confinement. If he were an insect, he would crawl through the bars and disappear into the sky beyond where the air was free and abundant.

One prisoner, 'Z' noticed, was trying to push his fingers through the bars to reach out to his visitor. Well, at least his fingers are free, 'Z' thought, if not his body. He wondered if it was a conscious or an unconscious gesture.

The visitors were either relatives or friends. Some were even spies sent by the other party to pick up some crucial bit of intelligence. An inmate with many visitors occupied a higher social niche in the gaol than others. There were some who had no visitors for years. As a prisoner's date of release approached,

the number of his visitors diminished. The under-trials generally had fewer visitors because their families still nourished the hope that either the case would be dropped or an acquittal granted or, if not that, then at least a bail would be set.

'Z' surveyed the crowd of visitors carefully, looking for a familiar face. He found none. He began to wonder why he had been sent for. He had forbidden his own family to try to see him. Friends, he did not wish to visit. His fellow writers were out of the question, worried sick, as they all were, for their own safety.

He paced up and down, a little restless, even annoyed. From the babble of voices in the small courtyard, it was difficult to pick out a coherent conversation. Answers and questions often bore no logical relationship to one another. Questions asked of one were answered by another, occasionally causing a great deal of amusement. Bad news from home was greeted with laughter and good news with tears. But he could hear snatches.

Pay the lawyer the rest of his fee. The case is to come up for hearing.

Sell what is left of the land.

If it is a good match, just go ahead. Don't wait for me. I can't bear to have a young unmarried sister in the house.

See what the court clerk wants. Pay him. I must have an early hearing. I don't want a hearing. Get the case file laid away.

Give the court clerk what he demands. We have a good case.

Try to make a deal with the public prosecutor. There are certain points he should not raise. Make a deal – on his terms.

Talk to the opponent's counsel. He can be helpful during the cross examination, if he wants. Give him whatever he asks for.

This court cannot be approached. The judge is honest. We have tried everything. It is all in God's hands now.

The bench is made up of good men. It seems to grant bails liberally.

It is an honest court.

The bench is incompetent. The chief judge is a fool. To hide his incompetence, he hands out heavy sentences. We must wait. A good man could replace him.
The counsel must secure the bail. Make a deal, I don't care how.
Bribe the police heavily. None of the accused must escape.
The new police officer is a young man. Does not take bribes. Very honest. He is not going to frame the innocent.
The police say they have orders from up above to screw the accused.
They can't help.
Your little girl pines for you.
The little boy misses you terribly.
How is dear Mother?
Pray to God. Keep this amulet. Tie it around your bicep. Recite these lines from the Book everyday.
You'll be bailed out.
A bail is out of the question.
An acquittal is a certainty.
There are going to be no acquittals in this case.

Murder, theft, adultery, drunkenness, abduction, bail, imprisonment, accused, lawyer, judge, court, money, bribes, police, relatives . . . all words, like clashing cymbals, in the air, 'Z' thought. He felt as if he were losing his mind. He rested his head against the wall. He was very tired. Who has come to see me? Where is he then? It cannot be a relation. I have no relations. A friend? I have no friends. A writer, a poet, an intellectual? No, they are all terrified of the government. They couldn't risk a visit, not to me. Who can it be then? He shouted. 'Is there anyone here to see me?' There was no answer.

'Z' began to search for his visitor's name in the register maintained for this purpose by the jail authorities. He did find an entry, but while he could read his own name, the visitor's name and signatures were impossible to decipher. Yes, there was someone, he was told, but what he looked like and where he had gone, nobody knew. It was a mystery.

'Z' returned to his barrack. He spent the rest of the day working his fatigue. In the evening, after the daily head count in barrack 'A' was over, he thought of his phantom visitor. He looked across the courtyard at the old tree in the corner which a woodpecker was trying to drill through with its little beak. Perhaps its persistence will pay off, 'Z' thought, and during the night the tree would come crashing down on barrack 'A'.

A poem of his came back to him.

Out of my body spring forth
Many branches, many hands, many limbs
Jutting forth towards the sky
Running their tongues over their parched lips
Out of my body spring forth
My roots, my many feet
Scissoring their way into the earth
Thirsty for its waters
The earth I stand on is moth-eaten
The woodpecker's quarry
Shelter of mice and snakes
Of little insects
I witness the world in silence
But let me tell you, my children
If I break and fall, as I might one day
The earth and sky
Will nestle you in their lap

8

> In a certain sense, the direction history will take is not the one we think. It lies in the struggle between creation and inquisition.
>
> Albert Camus

The under-trials who were to be produced in court for *roonumai* had been informed the evening before. Now they were all lined up in the gaol courtyard. Their papers were being scrutinized and the inevitable head count was in progress.

'F' ..... son of 'J'
'B' ..... son of 'S'
'K' ..... son of 'L'
'G' ..... son of 'B'
'A' ..... son of 'G'
'Z' ..... ?
'Z' ..... ?

Son of a bitch. Doesn't answer.

'Z' ..... son of 'Z', he said to himself.

He thought of Bulleh Shah, the great mystic poet of the Punjab.

> All letters of the alphabet look alike
> A point here, a cross there
> Small differences, but great confusion
> The first letter, the progenitor 'A'
> Sire of a million words
> Is Allah who lives in my soul

'B' I do not understand
I read it in incomprehension
But my ecstasy flows from 'A'
It makes me see the light
It cleanses my heart
It opens up the windows of my soul

The head count was now complete. The under-trials were handed over to a guard. He counted them again before leading them to the police van which was to be take them to court. They filed into it one by one. In all, there were thirty that morning.

The van swung out of the gaol. Schoolchildren and passers-by watched it go past.

Look, a van full of thieves.

A busload of convicts (were they already convicted?).

Ah! a bunch of cons (the distinction between convicts and under-trials did not exist for outsiders)!

Dacoits and highwaymen being moved!

'Z' heard the insults in silence. Through the secured windows, he could see life flowing by on the road. Bicycles, tongas, cars, hand-carts, people. What is it that separates us from those people out there, he asked himself. He pushed his fingers through the grill to get a feel of the air outside. His body felt electrified. He immediately withdrew his hand.

He looked at his companions. They were all watching the road speed by. He put his lips against the window and stuck his tongue out, as far as it would go. My tongue has tasted freedom, he thought. 'And what do you think you are up to, you son of a lunatic!' a guard shouted. He pulled his face away. He ran his tongue over his lips to savour the elusive taste of freedom he had just experienced. The driver put the van into high gear and with a lunrh it sped forward.

'Z' examined his companions, one by one. Were they all guilty, he wondered? Were they all criminals? Would they all be turned into convicts? He thought of Nizam Lohar, the blacksmith, the legendary Punjabi folk hero, a kind of Robin Hood of his time. What was his crime?

He robbed the rich and distributed the loot among the poor. He was considered a rebel, a murderer, a brigand by the rulers of the day. But why did the people love him? Because he showed them that the rich and the powerful could be defied?

There had been others like him in Punjabi history. Jabroo, Gumman Mann, Chiragha Maachi, Bola Kummar – all dacoits and highwaymen. They robbed the high and the mighty and humiliated them. They challenged and rejected their authority. They were, therefore, hated by kings and princes and overlords. They were outlaws because the law had always existed to defend the rich, the powerful against the weak.

And here they all were now – all criminals, hurtling down the road in a police van. Perhaps one day people would think of them too as heroes and deliverers and remember them in legend and folklore. Who were his companions?

One had committed a murder of honour. He had found his wife in bed with another man and he had simply chopped her head off. The man next to him had abducted his beloved on the day of her marriage to a man of her parents' choice. The one next to him had beaten up and maimed the village headman because he had tried to rape his young daughter. One had avenged his father's murder. There was a thief. A dacoit. A moonshiner. Some were not even sure why they had been arrested; but to the man on the street, they were all criminals, without distinction.

The van stopped in front of the court. They were taken down, counted again and pushed into the court's own lockup. The guard changed. Now they were in the hands of new keepers. Handcuffed, they were led out to the court. Some were given new dates of hearing. Others were sentenced – their status suddenly changed from that of under-trials to one of convicts. 'Z' was next.

Is he accused of murder by conspiracy?

Yes, sir. He is.

Bring him after fourteen days.

'Z' was led out. Many people had recognized him. Some were pointing him out to others. He paid no attention to them. The ceremony was over.

His mind went back to another ceremony.

The auditorium was full of people. It was the literary occasion of the season. His new book of poems had just come out. Papers were being read on his art and his personality. He was being praised to the point of embarrassment. He remembered he had read two poems.

I can see the moving pictures
But I do not hear the sound-track
I hear the sound-track
But I see no moving pictures
I see the moving pictures
But I do not hear the sound-track
I could tell you the story
But they have taken my power of speech away

Then the next one, called 'The Total Cost of Staying Alive'.

Retail price . . . pain, agony, torture
Surcharge . . . seal your ears
Super surcharge . . . blindfold your eyes
Super super surcharge . . . lock your lips
Flood relief fund . . . let the river of your thoughts be dammed
Total price . . . pain, agony, torture and farewell to seeing, hearing, thinking, speaking. Forever.

The applause was thunderous. He was asked to recite his famous poem 'The Gates Are Shut'. He began to read:

The gates are shut
When will the train pass?
And what train is it?
A passenger or an express
Or perhaps one that carries goods
Maybe just an engine
Shunting on the tracks?
Even a trolley perhaps?

Carrying important officials
With barefoot attendants
Running along the sides
But they have put the signal down
Surely something is expected
But from which direction
Left or right?
A passenger train
An express
A goods train
An engine or a survey trolley
Whatever it is
The tracks will remain blocked
And the gates will remain shut
But what about this traffic jam
Buses, trucks, rickshaws, taxi cabs
Cars, tongas, scooters, bicycles
There is no left or right now
They are moving in from all directions
Every inch of space is filled
Waiting, waiting for the gates to be swung open
To be the first to move on
Before everybody else
But why do the gates not open?
What is keeping them?
They are all honking now
Impatiently, without respite
The lines of traffic are growing
And growing
The train is late
Everyone wants to be in front
Of everyone else when the gates open
The rickshaw in front of the taxi cab
The cab in front of the car
The car in front of the truck
The truck in front of the minibus
The pushcart and tonga

In front of everyone, no matter who
They are all honking
They are all swearing
At the keepers of the gates
But why blame these poor men
They are only carrying out orders
From those up above
From the big ops room in the big station
So the orders to open must also come from the big ops room only
But when?
When will they say open the gates?
When will their orders come?
The lines are growing longer
And longer
When will they open the gates?

The van stopped in front of the gaol. The gates were opened. The inmates were asked to step out. They were counted. There were only twenty-six. Two had been sentenced and two had been acquitted.

'Z' was back in the auditorium. The meeting was over and the ops room of the big station had been informed that 'Z' had read volatile poems attacking the government.

Another cross was put against his name in the big ops room.

9

He lay as one who lies and dreams
In a pleasant meadowland
The watches watched him as he slept
And could not understand
How one could sleep so sweet a sleep
With the hangman close at hand

Oscar Wilde
The Ballad of Reading Gaol

The head warder watched the prisoner in his cell. He could not take his eyes off him. This man, he thought, has no fear of death. He is so calm, as if he is oblivious of his impending end at the gallows.

The prisoner was pacing up and down. Seven normal steps would take him from one end to the other. At times, he would accidentally touch the wall with his foot, as if he had forgotten how limited the space was. However, he did not feel confined. Not really. He felt free and strangely at peace. He knew that the conspiracies of his enemies would never succeed in destroying him. They had done all they could. They could do no more. They had managed to frame him with the aid of lying witnesses. He had been subjected to a vicious smear campaign in newspapers, radio and television by hirelings who called themselves journalists. But they had failed to soil his name or establish journalists. But they had failed to soil his name or establish his guilt. He was innocent and he was on the side of truth. That was the only thing which mattered in the end.

In a way, he was even looking forward to his end. I am going to die into life, he mused. But he prayed for inner strength, the strength to resist and defy his accusers until the end. His enemies knew that he had never weakened. He derived his strength ultimately from the people, millions and millions of them who, he knew, were behind him, believed in him. He lived in their hearts. In that knowledge he was secure. He knew from the first day that they would hang him. In the country of the blind, those with vision are invariably destroyed. It had always happened. Jesus, Hussain, Socrates, Mansoor, men who had gone to their deaths with a smile on their face, knowing that in their death lay life for others.

Kings would continue to execute Thomas Mores, but it is the Thomas Mores whom history would remember. The kings would be forgotten. The important thing was to uphold the truth and not accept defeat no matter what the odds.

When a prisoner is sentenced to death, he experiences a mind-blowing trauma, like a jetliner breaking the sound barrier. Some become paralytic with fear and shock, unable to control their reactions. He too had felt the impact when the sentence was announced, but the feeling had passed, as suddenly as it had come.

Other prisoners had often asked him what made him accept his travail with such equanimity and strength. 'Your inner strength is a reflection of something which lies beyond you, outside your being, as it were. I seem to have crossed the dividing line between life and death. My cell is not a no man's land to me, but merely a point of rest on the journey on which I am to embark. I have crossed the threshold and now there is no going back.'

Some condemned prisoners who were awaiting the outcome of mercy petitions filed on their behalf, felt reconciled to their end when they heard him talk of these things with such detachment. Their fear vanished and they no longer felt concerned with their appeals and petitions or the once dreaded appearance of the black warrant on the eve of execution.

The prisoner had grown attached to the man in his neighbouring death cell. Every night he would sing in a rich, poignant voice which would bring tears to the eyes of the condemned prisoners.

One evening they said to him, 'Do not sing tonight. It tears us apart.' His voice was not heard that night. He lay there on his bare floor, tossing about restlessly. He banged his head against the wall several times to give some expression to his urge to sing. Next morning, he told them, 'If you take away my music from me, I will die.'

'But you are going to die anyway,' one prisoner remarked.

'You do not understand. I want to be led to the gallows singing. The music will wash my pain away,' he replied quietly.

He was to be hanged in the morning. They heard him sing in his cell, his last hours on earth. He never stopped. When they stood him on the gallows, he asked that he be allowed to sing one more time. It was his last request and it was granted, 'with pleasure'. His voice rose above the scaffold.

The wages of love is death
The hangman's noose
Many have perished
The price of love is high
And few are able to pay it
So before you give your heart away
Remember that love's nemesis is death
And pain beyond imagining
Give not your heart away
To love-drunken men, my love
They are in perpetual ecstasy
Indifferent to the rituals of the learned
Intoxicated with truth
Their final release is the gallows
Give not your heart away
So thoughtlessly, my love

The hangman put the black hood over the condemned man's face and head. He was still singing. His hands were tied behind him and the noose put around his neck. The lever was pulled. His body fell into the well under the scaffolding. It hung there for half an hour, convulsing every now and then. There was life

in it still. The hangman looked at the doctor who nodded. The hangman rushed down the stairs which led to the bottom of the well. He grabbed the dangling prisoner by his testicles and kept massaging them with furious strength until all convulsions had ceased. The doctor joined the hangman, examined the body and pronounced the man clinically dead. The letter of the law had been observed. The condemned man had been kept hanging until he had been pronounced dead, the last breath gone from his body.

The prisoner felt tired. To rest his feet, he sat down, his back against the wall. Suddenly, from the shadows a prisoner appeared. He placed a handful of fresh earth in front of the condemned cell. He was followed by another prisoner, then another. They kept coming, one by one, performing this strange, elemental ritual, adding a handful to the now rising mound of earth.

When there were no more to come, the prisoner rose, picked up some earth and placed it in the parting of his hair. His comrades had bid him farewell, joining him in a companionship of the spirit through their earth offerings.

Then the prisoner rubbed his finger against a sharp-edged bar until blood began to ooze out. He made a boat out of a sheet of paper that had been left in his cell for him to write his will. He placed the bloodied paper boat in a gutter which ran through his cell and all those adjoining it, finally disgorging itself into a larger gutter which flowed along the outer rim of the boundary wall. He helped the little boat sail away by emptying a pitcher of water into the gutter.

It had started to rain. There was thunder and lightening.

The gaol clock struck ten.

10

For oak and elm have pleasant leaves
That in the springtime shoot
But grim to see is the gallows tree
With its adder-bitten root
And, green or dry, a man must die
Before it bears its fruit

Oscar Wilde
The Ballad of Reading Gaol

Prisoners with an education or the right social origins are placed in 'B' class. They get a bed to sleep on and a prisoner for a cook who is called a *mushaqqatya*, or one doing hard labour. With permission from the authorities, they can keep a watch, order a newspaper and keep a radio. In other words, a 'B' class prisoner is a privileged gentleman of means and position. Inmates of barracks and punishment cells are graded as class 'C' prisoners.

'B' class prisoners are also allowed a liberal number of visitors. The gaol staff, from the superintendent to the warders, treat them with deference. When the *burra sahib* comes on an inspection, 'B' class prisoners may stand in his presence, not crouch on the ground like the rest. They may even look him in the eye and speak to him, with respect of course. They are also allowed a reasonable quantity of meat, sugar, milk, clarified butter and wood for burning on a daily basis. On days when no meat is served or available, they are given a ration of half a dozen eggs.

Though the residents of 'B' class were aware of 'Z's presence,

none of them had considered it necessary to visit him. That would have been beneath them. The social register is very carefully maintained in the gaol. One 'B' class prisoner, serving a twenty-five year sentence, had been placed in a cell next to a political detainee. Their privileges included a little garden to tend and a fair-sized courtyard.

A 'fatigue' took 'Z' to that part of the gaol one day. He was busy painting the mud wall, when a *mushaqqatya* told him that the two 'B' class gentlemen wanted to see him. They were sitting in chairs in the open, in front of their cells. 'Z' walked across and stood there. He was not offered a chair. The man doing twenty-five years – long-termer – said to him, 'You are a famous poet, an eminent man. You should apply for "B" class.'

'I have no class. I am quite happy where I am,' 'Z' replied.

The politician lit his pipe and said, 'They should have given you "B" class in the first place because of your education and who you are. We know you and we also know that you have been falsely implicated. Look at us. We are here because of our political differences with the government. Initially, they just threw us in "C" class, but we kicked up such hell that they were forced to transfer us here. The truth of the matter is that it is very difficult to sleep on the bare floor. In any case, political people should be kept apart from common criminals.'

The man with the pipe continued. 'It is my view that writers should stay out of politics. They should stick to their writing. Anyway, writers have never made a success of politics.' 'Z' was still standing. He had not been offered a chair.

It had always been his habit not to answer remarks he considered unintelligent. He therefore kept quiet, but he wondered at what he had just been told with such authority. Were Lenin, Mao and Ho Chi Minh not writers, he asked himself? Who were Voltaire, Rousseau and Tolstoy – men who liberated the oppressed masses? Lorca and Neruda chose to sacrifice their lives in defence of freedom. And what about Qurratulain Tahira, Nazim Hikmat and Neto Senghor? Does this man even know their names? Perhaps not, otherwise this country would not have been in the sorry mess it is in today.

'Try to get into "B" class,' the long-termer advised. 'At least, it will save you this humiliating hard labour.'

'Why should I be an exception when my friends and companions are doing hard labour?' 'Z' asked.

'Don't you have any self-respect or dignity left? Men like you have brought politics into disgrace,' the politician answered angrily.

'I want to touch the depths of degradation, to become one with the poor. You talk of "C" class; I wish they had thrown me in a class even lower. There are no classes here. We are all prisoners. We all belong to the same class. There is only one other class – the class which has sent us to prison. They have created these divisions among us and they are happy with the situation. To me, their happiness means the destruction of our self-respect.' 'Z' had spoken with a great deal of emotion.

'Well, you can do what you please; but if you ever need food, you are welcome to come here,' the long-termer said. The old politician nodded his head in agreement.

'I am content to eat what others eat where I am. If they can subsist on that food, then what right have I to demand or wish for something better? No thank you,' 'Z' replied, and returned to his chores at the wall.

After a few days, the old politician was released. He had made a written apology to the government.

His place was filled by a young man to whom 'Z' took an immediate liking. Was it because he found him much like himself, devoted to the language of the land and the common people? Determined to go through the next twenty-five years in gaol – that being his sentence – without fear or apprehension. Whenever 'Z' wanted a breather, he would go and talk to him. His passion for the cause was something wonderful. They would talk about everything under the sun – literature, politics, philosophy, history. The young man was extremely well read. But what had endeared him to 'Z' was his white-hot determination to demolish the ugly wall that separated him from the people, from freedom and fulfilment.

Once he told 'Z' he was not really concerned about spending the next twenty-five years in gaol but about losing his hair. He

would gaze at himself in a mirror and look unhappy with his receding hairline.

Not much later, he was moved to another gaol. In his place came a painter. His only crime was that he had painted a picture that had greatly displeased the government. It was confiscated and burnt in front of him. There was something unmistakably artistic about him. When 'Z' had seen him for the first time, he had said to himself, he must be a painter.

'Z' began to spend a lot of time with him and with another young man, a political prisoner, lodged in a cell next to his. 'Z's friends from barrack 'A' would often ask him where he went and why. 'I like those two and what they stand for, what they believe. I want you to share their vision.' 'Z' would tell them.

The painter once said to 'Z', 'I have studied all major movements in art. To me the only great painters are those who tried to express the aspirations of the people in their work, who gave the masses the message of hope, who prepared them for change and revolution. It is my belief that in the struggle against oppression and injustice, the painter should employ his brush as if it were a weapon of war. I have tried to love my people and to identify myself with them and their anguish. I believe in only one movement – the movement of the people.'

'Z' asked him what had angered the authorities about his painting. 'That was my greatest work,' he replied. 'They burnt it in front of my eyes, but it does not matter. I shall paint in my blood now and the blood of my friends and comrades.' And he meant it literally.

He asked 'Z' to pick out one inmate from each barrack. There were ten of them in the gaol. Ten men were picked out. There was the painter himself and his friend next door. And there was 'Z'. That made the number thirteen. 'I am going to paint a picture in blood – our blood,' he said. His friend produced a blade and a makeshift brush. Also a piece of thick white paper. He first of all made a slash across 'Z's wrist, dipped his brush in the blood which began to flow out and drew a line across the paper. He did this with all others, including himself. He kept painting furiously, in violent strokes. Soon a face emerged, a face every-

one recognized immediately. 'But that is "him",' they all exclaimed. There was an argument as to where the blood painting should hang. 'Let it remain with "Z" – in custody,' the painter said.

The matter was reported to the *burra sahib* who consulted higher authorities, as he always did in such cases, for the most appropriate action. Word came next day that the painter and the young political worker would be lashed – fifteen and ten strokes of the whip respectively.'Z' was moved to the *qasuri chakki*, the punishment cell. The others were beaten black and blue by the warders, in front of other prisoners. Their heads, eyebrows and moustaches were shaved off by way of further punishment and humiliation. The painting was confiscated. It was announced that the painter and the political worker would be whipped in the morning. That night the rack on which a culprit is tied by his hands and feet was set up. The whips to be used the next day were ceremoniously placed in containers of oil to heighten their deadly effectiveness. The floggers were ordered to get in trim.

11

> I am here to whip people – and whip them I shall.
>
> Franz Kafka
> *The Trial*

The rack was placed in the main courtyard. The floggers were already in position, their half-naked bodies smeared with oil to give their bulging muscles flexibility. They were doing practice runs, making their whips sing by swishing them through the air. One of the whips had been specially studded with shrapnels, little bits of naked-edged steel. The instructions were 'The painter's flesh must fly about in little bits when he is whipped.' A generous award awaited the floggers if the performance was good.

The painter was brought forward and undressed. A thin bit of muslin was tied around his waist to cover his private parts. He was tied to the rack, his hands and feet threaded through metal rings to keep his body in place. Both the *burra* and the *nikka sahibs*, the gaol doctor and some members of the staff were in attendance.

The *burra sahib* nodded, a signal that the first lash should be administered. The flogger came hurtling in, stopped dead in his tracks a few feet from the victim, swung his body in a semicircle, leapt in the air and with a wild swish landed the whip with full force across the painter's back. His body trembled but he did not emit any sound. He had vowed to himself that he would take

the punishment in silence, even if they turned him into mincemeat.

The second lash descended. Tiny bits of flesh were ripped off the painter's back. The doctor stepped forward, felt his pulse, then shook his head, signifying that the man was still strong enough to take the punishment.

The third lash descended. The painter bit his tongue to control his pain, stifle a cry. He cut it and it began to bleed.

Then came the fourth lash. He felt as if his back had been ripped open, but no sound came from him. The *burra sahib* looked furious. He had expected the victim to howl like a wild animal. He rasped at the flogger, 'You bastard! This criminal is supposed to be whipped, not caressed and mollycoddled. Skin him alive. Lash him so hard that he cries for mercy and his screams reach high heaven.' The sixth lash turned the painter's a back into red pulp, but he did not utter a word.

The *burra sahib* was now getting livid with rage. He hissed to his assistant, 'These bastards have gone soft. I want new floggers recruited. They can't even make this wretch of an illustrator squirm. It is a disgrace.' The *nikka sahib* rose from his chair and whimpered, 'Sir, give the boys a break. I'll make them indent such a painting on the back of this mother fucker that his seventh generation will remember it.'

He whispered something in the flogger's ear. The seventh, eighth and ninth strokes landed at a slightly modified angle, with the tip of the lash slashing the victim's rib cage. Blood was now pouring in a steady trickle from a corner of his mouth. Much of the flesh from his back was gone. The bones were visible. The doctor had never seen anything like this in his experience. 'Is the son of a bitch alive or dead?' the *burra sahib* asked the doctor. The doctor examined him and replied, 'He has fainted. I don't think he can take any more.'

'What are you talking about?' the *burra sahib* said. 'He has had only nine. There are six to go. Give him the rest.' The doctor wanted to protest but thought better of it. The rest of the strokes were applied. His limp, unconscious body was removed from the rack, placed on a stretcher and sent to the gaol hospital. The area

around the rack was littered with tiny pieces of torn flesh. It made a strange, ghastly pattern on the ground.

It was now the turn of the young political worker, the painter's friend. His guilt was that he had supplied the makeshift brush and the razor blade. The rack was cleaned, the blood was wiped off and the whips were once again drenched in oil. The floggers had wiped off their perspiration and massaged themselves again with liberal quantities of oil to get ready for the next job.

The man was tied to the upstanding rack. 'I don't want this one to faint. I want him fully conscious. I want to hear him scream for forgiveness,' the *burra sahib* ordered his assistant.

'Sir, not only he, but his whole family will scream for forgiveness,' the underling answered. 'Look at the wretch. He is a man of a rib and a half.'

The flogger came rushing in, dancing on his feet, and applied the first lash. He moved away to let the other flogger repeat the grisly exercise. They were doing it as a team.

The *burra sahib* was again very angry.

His assistant was shifting in his chair, looking a bit embarrased.

The doctor was checking the pulse after every stroke. The warders were in a sort of daze.

The young man had taken the full punishment and he had remained conscious. His body had convulsed slightly after each lash, only to fall into repose for the next stroke.

He had greeted the first lash with the words 'Jeevey jeevey' – long live. Everyone knew to whom he was referring. He had repeated it after the second, third and fourth lash.

At the fifth he had said, 'Down with dictatorship!'

And at each subsequent stroke: 'Long live the leader of the people!'

Jeevey, jeevey!

Long live the leader!

May he live for a thousand years!

At the tenth and final stroke, he had shouted, 'Long live revolution!'

The *burra sahib* walked back to his office, followed by his assistant.

The man was united. The doctor sent for a stretcher.

'I will walk back on my own two feet,' he said defiantly. And he began to move with such assurance as if he had been showered not with lashes but spring flowers. The weakling with a rib and a half had today established a new tradition in the gaol which every prisoner would now wish to emulate.

The *burra sahib* was in his office. He could see the rack from his window. He could see the area around the torture device splattered with blood. He stared at it, then shut the window. He called a warder. 'I want that courtyard cleared of all trace of blood,' he said.

12

> The revolution may break up in consequence of any political crisis like the Dreyfus Affair or the Zabern Incident.
>
> Lenin

The painter and the politician were taken out of 'B' class. The painter was kept in the hospital for a few weeks, then sent to the *qasuri chakki* the punishment cell. The politician had been moved to the *chakki* immediately after the lashing.

'Z' was taken out of the cell every morning and made to hold his ears by threading his arms through his legs. Then he was given five strokes of the *chittar* – the torture instrument indigenous to the gaols of the Punjab – across his back, with the warder supervising the proceedings. If he felt that a stroke had been on the 'gentler' side, he would shout. 'Hit this son of a poet hard. Let him know what comes of writing poems against the government.' On days when the *burra sahib* was due to be present, the punishment was carried out with a great deal of ceremony.

'Z's back was now permanently inflamed because of the daily floggings. He did not even feel much pain any longer. It was no more than the prick of a needle. The skin had desensitized. He was not the only one beaten regularly. There were others. The general idea was that inmates should know that any deviation from orders would be mercilessly dealt with. Some prisoners would abuse their floggers and the entire gaol staff from the superintendent

down, while being punished. Such men were given extra punishment. They were either beaten by three or four guards together or suspended from the ceiling upside down. Some were tied to the bars of their cells for hours with iron stakes next to their legs to prevent them from bending. It was a vicious circle. To put an end to this daily ordeal, some prisoners would submit apologies, promising 'good behaviour' in future. Others would continue to defy and continue to get beaten regularly. A prisoner who was able to take punishment for extended periods was left alone in the end, his status now being that of a 'badmash' – dangerous and tough character.

The *burra sahib* had given standing instructions that the painter and the politician should be given five strokes of the *chittar* every day. While beating them, the warders would shout in their ears: 'So you want to make pictures, do you?' or 'How about making more speeches against the government?'

Except for the half hour during which they were taken out for what was now routine daily punishment, 'Z' and his two friends were kept constantly locked up. There was a new inmate one day in the cell next to 'Z's. He was said to have been punished because he used to keep all inmates in his barrack awake at night by singing folk songs from the Punjab and Sind. He had been warned several times, but it had no effect on him. Finally, he had been reported to the *burra sahib* who had ordered him moved to the *qasuri chakki*.

Next morning, he was marched out of his cell and asked by the warder, 'So you are the one who is always singing, you offspring of Saigal?'

'That is my life. The more you punish me, the more I'll sing,' he replied.

The first *chittar* came crashing down on his back. 'Let's hear you sing now,' the warder shouted. And he sang:

In the middle of the river
A plant has sprung up
And I am gripped by loneliness
It feeds on my life-blood

The second *chittar*:

Love, though behind a thousand veils
You hide your sun-like face
My eyes will search you out

The third *chittar*:

I long for my love
She is untrue and faithless
And cold and indifferent
My sadness deepens

The fourth *chittar*:

There are no roses in the garden, my love
And by passion I am smitten
Free no longer

The fifth *chittar*:

I have heard of lovers
Who kiss the noose
When they mount the scaffold to die

The warder was angry and ordered that, in future, he should be beaten while gagged. This became the routine now. However, there was a song in his heart they could not kill.

Often 'Z' would sit in his cell, resting himself against the wall. He began to notice a crow which would flit about in front of his cell, then fly off and perch itself on the gaol wall and from there leap up to a tree which stood next to it, but outside, and gad about from branch to branch. It looks so free and happy; perhaps it is trying to mock me, 'Z' would say to himself. For the crow, the confining wall of the gaol was a barrier that did not exist.

Often, when it would come and dance around the front of his

cell, 'Z' would pick up a pebble from the floor and try to shoo it away. The crow would take off but soon return. After some days, 'Z' noticed that he had run out of his little missiles. The crow must have found out because now he would come and strut around with total impunity. There was only one thing 'Z' could do. Ignore the bird as if it did not exist. After a few days, the crow stopped visiting 'Z'. It seemed he had got bored with the game.

'Z' was not allowed to meet the musician or the painter, nor were they allowed to meet him. The painter was etching a mural on his wall with a sharp-edged stone. Since it was very faint, it had escaped notice.

The politician was kept confined to his cell except for the daily dose of punishment. He would lie on the floor and wonder when the present order would change. How long would the people wait? Though he could not actually see the marks his flogging had left on his back, it was his faith that the people, his people, separated though he was from them, could see the evidence of the brutality he had been subjected to.

'Bastille. Bastille!' he would shout. But when was it going to come, he would ask himself. That glorious moment still lay in the womb of time. One voice alone was not enough. Other voices would have to join his. But when?

The musician had taken to singing after the warders went to sleep, though they were not supposed to. He used to keep time with a piece of stone on the bars. Perhaps the music will break them one day, he would tell himself. He would sing:

> My friends, I let my eyes guide my heart
> And I found true love
> Love beyond betrayal
> Those black of bodies can never get fair
> Any more than a crow can become white
> To die for others is martyrdom

'Z' had recently written a poem, his first since he had come.

My beauteous God
If You are full of loveliness
As they say
Then give me a bit of Your beauty
To sweeten the bitterness in my heart
Men like me, it seems, were born ugly
Raised in ugliness
Our life became ugliness itself
We once had a vision of beauty
But the unjust trampled it under their boots
They draped our bodies in ugliness
Like a net thrown over something vile
They ravaged our bodies with torture
But we drank down our pain
When we tried to seek release
They tightened the net
Even a bit more
We forgot what beauty was
And comeliness and dreams
We lost our zest for life
And hope abandoned us
Our ambitions fell apart
Like a house of cards
In the end we gave up
Admitting defeat
But not our faith in You
Dear God, if You do exist
Give us a glimpse of Your loveliness
And if you deny us this grace
Then may I say
That You too are ugly
And Your being
Is no more than a flight of fancy

'Z' scratched this poem with a pebble on the floor of his cell. The *burra sahib* noticed it next day while inspecting the cells. He could only read the last lines. He glared at 'Z' and screamed, 'This

man is an atheist. He denies the existence of God. He will be flogged tomorrow. Twenty lashes. Wash this sacrilege off the floor.'

'Sir, there is another bastard here, a musician. He has made life hell for the rest of the inmates. Does not let them sleep at night. The beatings he receives in the morning, every morning, seem to have had no effect on him,' the head warder piped in.

'Lash that descendent of Tansen ten times tomorrow,' the *burra sahib* ordered.

That night the rack was set up. The whips were placed in oil and the floggers began to flex their muscles, impatient for action.

13

If Christ had not died upon the cross, he would not have become the son of God.
Napoleon

Great people die young, the condemned man thought. Van Gogh, Schubert, Shelley, Keats, Kafka. Many great soldiers and statesmen died before old age could make them decrepit. They did not allow themselves to be overkaken by time and infirmity. Alexander, Napoleon, Lenin, Julius Caesar, so many.

Napoleon!

Is this cell going to be my St Helena, he wondered?

What have I done to deserve this?

Is it my fate because I tried to serve the people? If you do that you make powerful enemies. The bloodhounds are after my blood, he said. But what did it matter if the people were behind you, he consoled himself. At that moment, he knew that he would not mind dying young.

He thought of his life. He had been denounced first because he had been born into the landed aristocracy. Perhaps, my class origins prevented me from becoming a revolutionary in the true sense, but in my death I'll become one.

He knew that he had laid the foundations of revolution in his country. From that there would be no going back. When the revolution did come finally, it would be brought about in his name. That he knew.

He placed the nightingale on his shoulder. Then he began to pace up and down his cell. He quickened his pace. He could hear music and he tried to keep time to it with his feet – a kind of Viennese waltz. The wind began to howl in the trees.

It suddenly dropped, though he could still hear it. It sounded like a funeral march.

He walked up to the front of the cell. He picked up the bird from his shoulder and slipped his hand through the bars. The nightingale, sensing open air, began to chirp restlessly. It seemed to want to be freed. The wind rose again.

He walked back to the middle of the cell. He felt that his ears were full of the elemental folk music of Sind, the land of the mighty river Indus. 'Dammadam must qallandar . . . dammadam must qallandar,' he sang, the mystic song of the vast deserts of Sind, full of power, full of passion.

The gaol clock struck eleven.

14

Our thoughts will be devoted to the knowledge of humanity, our affections to her love, our actions to her service.
Auguste Comte

Writing is a form of prayer.
Franz Kafka

All those who are struggling for freedom today are ultimately fighting for beauty.
Albert Camus

The rack had been set up.

The two floggers were preening themselves for action.

The musician was tied up. The gaol staff came and took their places.

The first flogger came dancing in. He swung his whip in the air.

'I am going to dedicate the ten lashes I am to receive to the ten great *thaats* and *raaga*s, the musician whispered to himself.

The first lash struck him.

'I dedicate it to the Bhairon *thaat*, *raaga* Malkauns,' he said. 'May God the protector look over us.'

The second stroke of the lash, he dedicated to the Purbi *thaat*, *raaga* Basant.

The third to the Kafi *thaat*, *raaga* Kafi.

The fourth to the Todi *thaat*, *raaga* Mian Ki Todi.

The *burra sahib* hissed to the *nikka sahib*, 'Tell this bastard to apologize. He may even sing his apology. I wouldn't mind.'

The fifth lash tore up his skin. He stifled the scream that had almost escaped his lips and said, 'To the Khamaach *thaat*, *raaga* Jai Jai Wanti.'

The sixth to the Kalyan *thaat*, *raaga* Yaman.

Then he fainted, but the flogger did not stop. The seventh lash was applied with the same ferocity. The doctor took a look at him, felt for his pulse and said, 'He can take the rest.'

'Then they better be a bit musical,' the *burra sahib* said.

The eighth lash descended. In a comatose voice, the musician whispered, 'To Bhairvin, *raaga* Purya Dhanasri.'

The ninth came. 'To Bilawal, *raaga* Shankara.'

When the last lash was administered, blood began to gush out of his mouth. The doctor examined him, then sprinkled some water over his face. He gained a fleeting kind of consciousness. 'To Aasavri, *raaga* Darbari,' he said as in a dream. They untied him. Suddenly he was conscious.

'Long live the revolution and its music,' he cried.

'Take him to the punishment cell,' the *burra sahib* ordered. He was led away.

'Z' was tied to the rack. Not only was the entire gaol staff present, but representatives of the 'higher authorities' had also been invited to witness the proceedings. The gaol *maulvi* blessed the whip with which 'Z' was going to be beaten by reciting a holy verse and then blowing on it. It was now a religiously sanctified whip, consonant with the offence. It was another matter that this *maulvi* had once been caught performing an unnatural act with a young boy in the mosque.

The flogger began to run, the way fast bowlers do, to apply the first lash. He too had been informed of the atheistic crime of which 'Z' was to be punished.

'Z's mind began to wander. He remembered the time when four of his collections of poems had been declared obscence and confiscated. He had filed a suit in the high court against the decision. In his petition he had written:

'I belong to that generation of writers which came to consciousness at the time of independence. I grew to manhood in this country. I was dedicated to its growth and prosperity, but a savage minority established its stranglehold on the infant state from its inception. A dictatorial and unjust government was imposed on the people. I belong to a generation that witnessed the betrayal of its dream. It watched in horror as the chasm between what was professed and what was actually done widened with each passing year. It saw how a double standard was applied and operated. The palaces of the new rulers were as far removed from the people as the colonial office in London used to be. The only group which flourished in the new state was a tiny elite which was hypocritical and contemptuous of the poor. The lot of the disinherited did not change.'

The first lash was administered.

'This class of exploiters which has ruled the country, can draw impressive graphs and trot out statistics to show that widespread economic development has taken place, but these are only devices to fool the masses. They are indifferent to the hungry and the powerless.

'We were not fooled. We knew that our dream had been betrayed by a cynical and cruel gang to men. Its only concern remained with its own survival and its energy was spent on finding new devices to trample the people's rights and take away their dignity. The country became a haven for fortune hunters. No method was considered too brutal as long as it generated more ill-gotten wealth.

'In the mad race for wealth and power, all values were thrown overboard. Some of the newly rich became so contemptuous of the common people that they prided themselves on being known as international citizens. Those who stayed back were transformed into selfish monsters, interested only in their own well-being and prosperity. They considered themselves a cut above the rest and tried to imitate their former colonial masters. They adopted their customs, their thinking, their value system, thus sacrificing reality on the altar of an illusion.'

He was whipped a second time.

'To them the only truth is the opulence of their living rooms. Anyone who reminds them of the stark reality of the poor and the dispossessed, is dubbed a perpetrator of obscenity. They do not wish to be reminded that in their "Islamic democracy", every cardinal sin is being committed with impunity. This minority is wedded to the perpetuation of the status quo. In its search for friends, it makes unholy alliances with foreign interests. It barters away the national interest for its own prosperity and protection.

'The means of national wealth are handed over to foreign powers. I belong to a generation that has seen this dichotomy. We believe this country was established so that we could live in freedom as an independent and self-reliant people. Those who rule us are not our representatives. Their conduct and policies are in direct conflict with the aspirations of the people. They have prostituted the high purpose for which we had established an independent state. They would not hesitate if they had to destroy the state in order to safeguard their interests.'

He was hit for the third time.

'In 1971 the country was dismembered because the majority of its people was convinced that the ruling clique would not permit it to live in freedom, the freedom which had come in 1947. The ruling clique was not interested in the betterment of the masses. It was willing to sacrifice the country if its survival was threatened. This despicable elite is naturally opposed to the growth and development of indigenous languages and cultures. It was opposed to the culture and language of the people of Bengal, as it is to the language and culture of the people of the Frontier, Baluchistan, Sind and the Punjab.'

The fourth lash descended on his back.

'The ruling classes will conspire with foreign powers to deny freedom and fundamental rights to the people of this country.

'My generation has rejected this double standard. We have chosen to adopt the ways of the peasant, even the clothes he wears, and feel proud of it.'

'We were taught how to speak English, but we were proud of our ability to write in our own languages – Pushto, Baluchi, Sindhi, Punjabi. We did not write about the big cities and the clubs and

villas of the rich. Nor did we write about their women who drive around in sleek limousines, dressed in smuggled silk saris.

'We did not write about their living rooms and fashion houses and night clubs, their foreign music and their glittering floors. We wrote about the servants who live in little hovels attached to the swank villas of the rich. We wrote about open drains and the filth in which our people had been consigned to live.'

The sixth lash came swishing through the air.

'We wrote about the moral turpitude of the rich and how they seduced the poor man's daughter, just because she was hungry and powerless. We were accused of obscenity because we wrote the truth. We exposed the hypocrisy of the rich and their prevarications. We were not afraid to speak and write the truth.'

The seventh lash was administered.

'We were only following what that great writer Saadat Hasan Manto had once written. He had said, "If you are unaware of the times through which we are passing, I would recommend that you read my stories. If you find them intolerable, it only means that we live in intolerable times. All my shortcomings are the shortcomings of my times. There is nothing evil in my writing. The evil which is ascribed to me is the evil of my society. I am not a sensationalist. I do not wish to excite the prurient tendencies of my readers. How can I disrobe a culture and a society which is so totally naked."'

He was hit for the eighth time.

'Nearly four hundred years before the birth of Christ, a sculptor's son was charged with destroying the morals of the Athenian youth. An assembly to respectable citizens found him guilty by a vote of two hundred eighty and sentenced him to death. He was given a cup of poison to drink. Today, the world does not remember his accusers but only him.'

He was lashed again, the ninth.

'Galileo was accused by the clergy of heresy. He was tried and convicted. Despite his old age, he spent the last years of his life in confinement. But his heresy was to be vindicated after his death.'

The tenth lash.

'It is a fact that whenever a thinker has found himself in con-

flict with society, it has been because society is never willing to have its contradictions exposed. The sicker a society is, the more intolerant it becomes. It stifles free inquiry and castigates those who question its wisdom. When rulers become incapable of taking dispassionate decisions, you can take it that they have become incapable of ruling.'

The eleventh lash.

'Writing in 1860, Lord Acton said of the Inquisition: "In Spain the dread of error was so great that it led to a fear of all mental activity. Literature was sacrificed to religion. Because faith may be impelled by science, science was proscribed; and a system of stagnation was introduced, by which the Church was deprived of the aid which literature affords to her. The Inquisition did more than any other thing for the ruin of Church and state in Spain by promoting political despotism and intellectual stagnation."'

The twelfth lash.

'In 1533 Rodrigo Manrique, son of the Erasmain Inquisitor General wrote to the great humanist Juan Luis Vives about the fate of letters in Spain: "It is clear that down there one cannot possess any culture without being suspected of heresy, error and Judaism. Thus silence has been imposed on the learned. As for those who take refuge in erudition, they have been filled, as you say, with great terror."'

The thirteenth lash.

'It is in such time that the doors of rational, scientific thought are closed, that development of societies and nations is arrested, that reaction purports to stultify the progress of positive action. He who rips the mask off is persecuted for heresy, error and obscenity.'

The fourteenth lash.

'It is a sad commentary on our moral double standard that creative writing in the Pushto, Baluchi, Sindhi and Punjabi languages is being consciously discouraged. Those who continue to write in them are dubbed anti-state and their work is proscribed. Yet, these are the only writers who can communicate with the ordinary people.'

The fifteenth lash.

'To condemn a Punjabi writer today is to condemn the Warris Shahs and the Bulleh Shahs to tomorrow. To condemn a Sindhi poet writing today is to condemn a Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai of the future. To condemn Pushto and Baluchi writers is to condemn the Rahman Babas and the Jam Durks of tomorrow.'

The sixteenth lash.

'It is the suppression of the genuine culture of the individual citizen that leads to his disaffection with the entire system as constituted by the ruling classes.'

'Take the history of the Punjab which has come down to us from the British colonialists. The Punjabi was depicted as a submissive and subservient race, which welcomed all external invaders and had no identity of its own. The present Punjabi writers are trying to reinterpret the identity of their region and their people. The renaissance which has swept across the vast lands of this province must not be stifled, which is what the ruling classes are attempting to do.'

The seventeenth lash.

'It is a tragedy that the present forces of obscurantism have taken up where the British left. The credentials of Punjabi folk heroes are rejected and made fun of. To them Dulla Bhatti is a dacoit and Ahmad Khan Kharl, a brigand. In effect, every genuine literary work in Punjabi is being described as anti-state and obscene.'

The eighteenth lash.

'If what we, the young writers, are producing is obscene and dangerous, then we have a right to ask why the authorities are so generous in condoning the obscene and tasteless works of many others. There is only one explanation: those people do not write in the local languages.'

The nineteenth lash.

'We reject our inquisitors and we reject the moral code by which they judge us.'

The twentieth and final lash.

When 'Z' was produced in court to defend himself he had said to the judges, 'I refuse to admit that my work is obscene.' The court had asked him to recite one of his 'obscene' poems. The case was adjourned, causing some trepidation in government circles.

The court was instructed not to proceed with the case, but let it lie in cold storage. Meanwhile, instructions had gone out that a foolproof case should be instituted against 'Z', a case involving such a grave charge that, once involved, he should never be able to get out of it.

'Z' was untied. He refused to be taken back on a stretcher. He said he would prefer to walk. He was returned to the punishment cell. He could not sleep that night, his pain was so intense and so unremitting. It was a stormy night. The power had gone off. The prisoners were asking the warders when it might be restored. 'We do not know. The failure has occurred at the source, back there somewhere. But why are you interested? Do you want to make love to your mother in the light?' they had been told.

'Z' began to recite an old poem of his:

We are not to be blamed
The entire city is without light
Wait a little more
But how long?
That we cannot say
The failure occurred somewhere out there
Who knows, it may come any minute
Or it may be hours
But we want to know
Please tell us
Speak to us
We are afraid of the dark
How long will we languish like this?

'Z' tried to move his body, but the pain was so excruciating that he did not try again. All night long, he lay flat on his face. The power came back some time in the early hours of the morning. There was a pool of half-dried blood on the floor. He tried to take a drink of water from the pitcher but it was empty. He stood himself against his bars and touched them with his tongue. It felt cool. His thirst seemed to have gone.

15

My loss may shine yet goodlier than your
gain when time and God give judgement.
Swinburne

But I am constant as the northern star
Of whose true fixed and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament
Shakespeare
Julius Caesar

The condemned prisoner was running his fingers on the bare surface of his floor. He began to reminisce about his home.

He lived in a house that was thirty years old. When he had moved in, it was in a completely dilapidated state. Originally, it had all been one large house, but a dividing wall had been erected in the middle, breaking it down into two portions. Plaster was peeling off the walls and the doors and windows were in disrepair. The rooms were full of dust as there was nothing to keep the wind out.

When he was a child he had vowed to himself that one day, he would put this house in order. The lawn was full of tall, uncut wild grass and the trees looked dried and untended. The birds would come and chirp mournfully in this wilderness.

And he would sit there on the front steps and promise himself that one day when he grew up he would make this crumbling house and garden beautiful. He would whitewash the walls

and paint the front nicely. He would tend and water the plants and make them grow flowers. He would level up the lawn, hack away the wild, ugly grass and make it look like a green carpet. He would repair the doors so that the wind would not bring in dust and street filth. He was waiting for the day when he would fulfil his promise to himself.

Years later, he kept his promise. He did all the work with his own hands. He painted the doors and the windows, the walls and the exterior. He put on a new roof. He raised the boundary wall so that no burglars should be tempted to break in at night.

He had, however, made many enemies. His neighbours were jealous of him and he was afraid that at the first opportunity, they would throw him out and occupy the house. There was a watchman in the neighbourhood who would patrol the streets at night, carrying a gun, proud in his uniform. He bought the watchman a new gun, a better one.

But the neighbours who lived in houses far posher than his, did not like the way he lived. They would have preferred him to live as he had always lived. They did not approve of his chin-up attitude. They liked their neighbours to be servile. They sent for the watchman and did a deal with him. The resident of the house was quite oblivious of it. He had complete trust in him. The first indication of what was to follow came when the neighbours had some street urchins smash up his windows. The watchman had done nothing but, just to put up a show, he had waved his gun at them several times. However, he had done nothing to stop them. He was part of the conspiracy.

One night, the watchman broke into the house and, pointing his gun at the owner, informed him that from now on he was the owner of the property. The neighbours were thrilled. Many of them were highly religious, always offering their prayers in public view and never went anywhere without their prayer beads. They all came and congratulated the watchman on his feat. They demolished the wall. The owner of the house was locked up in the cellar.

The prisoner looked around and said to himself: they have

locked me up in this cellar but the residents of the house, which was mine and from where I was excommunicated, are still my people.

He tried to raise himself from the floor by creeping up the bars. He could see beyond the boundary wall now. Green fields and flocks. But the farmers were asleep. He said to them, 'Oh! my brothers, wake up. Don't you know that your enemies have come like thieves in the night and they have taken your flocks away? Wake up, brothers. A new day is going to dawn. A new chapter is going to begin in our lives when the clock strikes the hour of midnight.'

The gaol clock struck twelve.

16

> All my life and my strength were given to the first cause of the world – the liberation of mankind.
>
> Lenin

In this far-flung part of the country, thousands of people had assembled from everywhere to attend the great peasant conference. 'Z' had been here four days already. The peasants and workers were full of anger. They declared that from now on they would not beg for their rights, but grab what was theirs and burn down what was denied to them but what rightfully belonged to them. They said they rejected the government policy of dilly-dallying. It had gone on too long. In fact, every government policy, every move was designed to help the landlords and harm the interests of the workers. They also declared that politics as practised by the professionals was a ruse to take away the rights of the workers and the landless peasants. The time had come to change the style of politics. The people must rise and take away what had been unjustly grabbed from them.

'Z' was asked to address the conference. He told the peasants, 'I agree that politics as practised in this country by a select class of big landlords has done immense damage to the peasants and farmers, the tillers of the land. Today, we declare that we are not only committed to fight for the rights of the peasants but of oppressed men and women everywhere. We speak in the

name of the people who include workers, labourers, students and revolutionary intellectuals. We reject the politics of the feudal overlords. We have witnessed what they have done to us over the years. One group takes over power and another group pretends to get into opposition; but the fact is that they are all one. They look after each other's interests. In their politics, the people have no role to play. They only believe in intrigue and deceit. We reject that.

'We are determined to establish the sovereignty of the masses. We will not permit the agents of the landlords, the capitalists and the bureaucracy to make inroads in our ranks. Today, the entire country, from the big cities to the smallest villages, is reverberating with the slogans of the people. A new consciousness has gripped them. The time has come when together with our joint strength, we can smash the present system to pieces. Our enemies have joined hands. Of that we must be aware.'

'Z' recited his poem:

Let no one sleep tonight
My friends
Our enemies will move tonight
The watchmen will do their bidding
My countrymen, oh! prisoners
The morning is about to break
The wall of oppression is weakened
One more push and. . . .

'Z' made a detailed analysis of the convergence of vested interests that had always worked against the popular movement for change. He denounced the unholy trinity of landlords, capitalists and bureaucrats. The conference was aflame with revolutionary fervour. Workers and peasants made fiery speeches declaring that the long night of terror had reached its end and the new sun will rise, dispelling what remained of the gloom.

On the last night of the conference, all the participants and delegates gathered in an open field and sat around a huge bonfire. An old peasant, who had established the peasant move-

ment in the country, gave 'Z' a burning log of wood and asked him to light a torch with it. When 'Z' raised the torch high over his head, it seemed to bathe the night in incandescent light. He heard drums being beaten and people singing, dancing and raising slogans. The women who sat in a separate group suddenly began to sing a rousing chorus and everyone joined them.

This lovely land
May it always stay green
From end to end

The next day 'Z' and his friends returned. They were thrilled with the success of the conference.

'Z' was constantly being interviewed by newspapers. However, the right-wing press lost no time in launching a bitter attack on him. He was called a terrorist, a miscreant, a foreign agent and stern action was demanded against him. Newspapers sympathetic to the cause splashed his pictures on the front pages. One which showed him with his hands raised high over his head, joined in a gesture of solidarity and strength, became for the workers a symbol of the cause.

A day later, an important member of the government called on 'Z' and met him for an hour. He was told to stay away from the movement which had taken root and was growing. He was made tempting offers and, when these failed, he was threatened. The official wiped his glasses with his handkerchief and said to 'Z', 'If you do not change your ways, a "horrible example" will be made of you.' 'Z' kicked him out of his room.

Two days later, orders were issued proscribing all of 'Z's books. When he read the announcement in the paper, he laughed, 'What greater obscenity can there be than that my books have been proscribed for being obscene!'

'Z's friends held meetings and issued statements denouncing the government action, while the others praised the decision, describing 'Z' as an enemy of the state and an enemy of Islam.

But steps were already being taken to make a 'horrible example'

of him. 'Z' thought of a poem the Sudanese poet Abdul Rahman had written about Lorca:

My dearest Lorca, you once said
Open your eyes and stop dreaming
You must forgive me, my great poet
But the earth is trembling
Like your blood in Granada
And the sound of music is like a dirge
You wrote about freedom and death
Freedom, you said, is the ultimate joy
And death, a sleep
Without sound, without fog

In the month of July, they started making arrests. People were being picked up from their houses in the middle of the night. Public meetings, processions and other gatherings were banned. Special courts were set up to dispense summary 'justice' in the form of lashes.

In one part of the city, workers occupied a factory and threw out the owners and the administration in pursuit of their demands. The occupation lasted four days. On the fifth day, the government ordered the police to break it up. Indiscriminate firing led to the death of fifteen workers. There was tremendous tension in the city. People were enraged by the brutality of the police. Under the circumstances, 'Z' and his friends went underground. Police carried out raids at several places in a bid to arrest them. Workers were tortured so that information about the whereabouts of 'Z' and his comrades could be extracted, but nobody talked.

Underground literature was being circulated freely in the city. 'Z' wrote a firebrand article in one of the pamphlets on the politics of repression. He began with a poem by Neruda:

O! Madrid, my city
You stand alone
And you are magnificent

The month of July has caught up with you
Your frolicsomeness is now confined to a little tenement
Your streets were flooded with light
As were your dreams
But you have been made to recede
By ferocious generals
And uniforms black with rage
By polluted storm waters
By mud and impurities
By foaming mouths
But . . .
When your flaming sword
Descends on the heads of
Unjust armies and faithless churches
There will be a silence all round
Listen, my city
The white banners of the morning are fluttering in the wind
And though there is blood on your lips
You are smiling

'Z' had written: 'Because of your temporary silence, the government thinks it has defeated you, the people. It thinks that it has gained respect and authority. But the truth is otherwise. You are surrounded by hunger and fear and your liberty has been taken away and you are sad, but the oppressors do not know that you are waiting for the moment when you will smash your chains and declare your freedom from bondage.'

Despite the secret police and government spies. 'Z's writings were continuing to reach the people. In one of his messages, he included a poem by Nazim Hikmat because he felt that it expressed with eloquence what he wanted to convey.

Your hands are strong as stones
And sad like a captive's song
Your hands are coarse
Like the limbs of work animals
Like the angry faces of hungry children

Your hands . . .
They are like honey bees, skilful and dedicated
Fulsome like ripe breasts
Brave like nature
Their rough texture
A covering for the love that flows under the skin
This earth of ours
Rests not on a bull's horns
It rests on your hands
I say to you, my people
They feed you on the leftovers from their tables
When you are dying of hunger
When you need bread and meat
They give you from their white-draped tables
What they cannot eat
So you take your leave from this world
Which is full of fruit trees
Oh! my people
And those of you who live in Asia
And Africa and the Near East
From the Middle East to the isles of the Atlantic
You who are more than seventy per cent
Of the earth's population
You who are my countrymen
You have grown old and weary
Like your hands
My people
If radio and TV broadcast lies
If the posters on the walls
And the ads in the newspapers
Are a pack of lies
If the girls on the silver screen
And their naked legs
Also lie
If prayers lie
And dreams are false

If lullabies lie
If the minstrel in the tavern is a liar
If the moonlit night lies
If the whole world lies
And those who live on your labours
It is because they want to make your hands
Servile like the earth
Blind like darkness
Stupid like a shepherd's dog
They want to stop you from rebelling
Against the rich and the powerful
Who rule this world
Where you are but visitors

One day because of a spy in their ranks, many of 'Z's companions were picked up by the police. There were some people in the movement who pretended to be revolutionaries but were actually agents of the government. Those arrested were taken for 'special treatment' to an interrogation centre. They were chained like animals and put on slabs of ice for hours, but torture failed to break them. They were invited to tender apologies and renounce their past affiliations. Their answer was: long live revolution. These were men who turn the pages of history into leaves of pure gold.

'Z' moved to another hideout. His next communication contained a poem by the Palestinian poet, Taufiq Ziad.

In the bark of the olive tree
I write the names of the prisons
They kept me in
Prisons which changed my life
I write the names of the handcuffs I wore
As my bridal attire
The names of the files
Prepared against me by my enemies
And all the insults heaped upon my head

All this and more
On the bark of the olive tree

A few days later, 'Z' was arrested on a charge of conspiracy to murder.

The wheel had come full circle.

17

Their skulls are made of lead
That is why they cannot weep

Garcia Lorca
Ballad of the Spanish Civil Guard

Prisoners are a strange lot. One minute their hopes are high and in the blinking of an eye, they sink into the depths of despair. If there is a power failure in the gaol, they get depressed. When power is restored, they begin to dance like children, their spirits suddenly uplifted. The slightest change in the environment can make them happy. A cloud in the summer sky. A cool breeze in the humid evening. Blossoms in the mango trees. Meal time at the communal kitchen. The end of the weekly inspection. At such moments, they feel that they are free. The high and hard walls of the gaol cease to exist – though their joy is transitory.

Some prisoners, especially those serving long terms, are very particular about taking barefoot walks on the dew-covered grass every morning. It gives them a feeling of freedom, of being one with nature. Some feel that by trampling upon the dew, they are in some way getting even with nature.

'Z' used to take these early morning walks, before he was sent to the punishment cell. He had perfected a strange ritual. He would wipe his feet on the grass, then sit down carefully, with great deliberation, remove each blade of grass from his feet. He would gather them and count them, one by one, then

spread them back on the ground, trying his best to place them where the lawn appeared to be somewhat bare. It was one of those small, meaningless but profoundly important things all prisoners do to maintain their sanity.

One day 'Z' found a rose bush in the gaol compound. There was one solitary flower on it. He plucked it, borrowed a broken glass from a prisoner and placed the rose in it, as if it were a big bouquet. He then carried the glass with the rose to his cell and put it between two bars so that the rose stayed on the 'free' side of the dividing line. In a few days, the rose began to wither. Its petals started to fall and float away one by one. After they were all gone, 'Z' lifted the glass, threw away the dried up stalk and drank the water. It made him feel as if his whole being was suffused with the aroma of roses.

There were many inmates of the punishment cells who were addicted to drugs. Their supplies were easily obtained, as long as the right price was paid. One of them said to 'Z', 'This is the only way to keep going. How else can one take the boredom and the torture?' A lifer, after taking a long drag on his marijuana-laced cigarette would téll people, 'I was in the city today. Met all my family and friends.' Other times he would utter strange noises, like an aircraft revving up its engines. Then he would start running. Many times he had tried to 'fly' over the boundary wall. The warders would bring him back, give him a little beating and shut him up – until the next time, that is. He had only done four years. There were twenty-one to go.

Many of the new residents of the punishment cells were from 'Z's old barrack. They were often beaten in the morning. 'Z' recognized their voices.

'For God's sake, don't beat me any more!'

'For the sake of God and His Prophet, spare me now!'

'Forgive me in the name of God!'

'For the love of God and His beloved Prophet, let me go!'

The warders would remain unmoved. They had heard it all before. Prisoners are always invoking God and His Prophet's name.

'Z' felt that in gaol, most people got into the habit of pray-

ing. Many would keep the holy Qur'ān next to their pillows. Others would work at their rosaries furiously murmuring 'God is kind, God is forgiving. Forgive our sins.' A long-termer used to say. 'Those who are guilty should ask for God's forgiveness. But those who are innocent and have never committed a sin, well, what sins of theirs is God to forgive?' Some would pray, 'Most merciful God, forgive those who sent the innocent to gaol' A cynic would quip, 'If there were a God, why would I have been sent in for life, me an innocent man? Does He want that the innocent should first be punished and then that they should beg Him to forgive the sins they never committed in the first place?'

A prisoner who used to be a *maulvi* would say, 'God is all-knowing. You must have committed some other sin for which you have been punished.'

'I have committed no sin. In my case, God made a mistake. It is some other sinner in whose place I am being punished,' the man would reply.

'May He forgive us, may He forgive us,' the *maulvi* would intone piously and slip away. 'Z' would watch it all and wonder. Surely God, he would argue, is surely able to tell between the sinful and the sinless. It never ceased to amuse him that the two warders who were generally called upon to beat the prisoners were named Rahim and Karim which means benevolent and merciful.

One day 'Z' was marched out of his cell, his hands tied behind his back and taken into the *burra sahib*'s office. He was told not to speak to any inmates.

'You have been in the *qasuri chakki* for quite some time now. Why don't you make an apology and you will be sent back to your barrack?' the *burra sahib* said.

'Apologize for what?'

'Don't you know your offence?'

'What offence?'

'You are an atheist and you are a government opponent.'

'Our Gods are different and I will oppose all those governments which men like you support.'

'Don't talk this philosophical nonsense to me. Are you prepared to make an apology?'

'What apology and for what?'

'Shut up, you are mad. Mad!'

He made a sign to the warder who led 'Z' out of the room.

As he was passing in front of the main gaol entrance, he saw some warders dragging an old woman in. Her hair was dishevelled but 'Z' recognized her immediately. 'Mai Laddhi!' he exclaimed. The old woman smiled. She raised her left hand in a victory sign. One of the guards said to the guard on duty at the entrance. 'She has raised slogans against the government and disturbed public peace. That is why she has been brought in. Take her to the women's ward.'

'Z' was returned to his cell. The painter and the young politician were also taken to see the *burra sahib* and returned to their cells. They had refused to make an apology. As they passed 'Z's cell, they raised their hands in victory signs.

Mai Laddhi was thrown into the ward reserved for women prisoners. She was given a warm welcome by the women. One of the inmates who was pregnant was particularly happy to see the old woman, because Mai Laddhi was a midwife by profession. That night 'Z' wrote a poem.

They put rubber pacifiers in our mouths
And tore us away from our mothers
We were made to learn walking with a 'walker'
We did not crawl on the ground as children do
We did not learn to stand as children do
We never tasted the milk of our mother's breast
We never smelt the earth and its fragrance
We were betrayed
But we know that today
Our mother's breasts are flowing with milk
No longer will sons be taken away from their mothers
They will learn to walk on their own feet
This is the writing on the wall

18

Negation is my God, as reality formerly was.
My heroes are the destroyers of the past.
Belinsky

Annihilation of the past is the procreation of the future.
Herzen

There are four and a half hours left to freedom, the condemned prisoner thought. He wished it could be over in the blinking of an eye.

There were so many things he had not had the time to work out over the years. Nagging moral and intellectual questions he had always been aware of, but had never quite managed to resolve, not consciously anyway.

There was time still to settle this account. There would be some minuses and some pluses. Positive and negative answers, if there was such a thing. He might find himself denying men, institutions, influences, art, science, sex, peace, poetry. But poetry was what bothered him most of all, poetry written by the classical poets in the language in which he had chosen to write himself.

He decided to subject his favourite poet, Bulleh Shah, to analysis. What kind of a man was he and what had he been made into? Did those who laid flowers on his grave every year, understand him and what he had written? What had he written?

What was his message? Was he an existentialist poet? He placed the nightingale on his shoulder, moved towards the wall and began writing on it with his finger. He found this an easy away of organizing his thoughts.

Life was a burden we carried. There was no escape from it. Nobody knew with certainty what we were or where we were going. Everyone was a wayfarer, but there were few guides. There were many who had followed these guides, but how many had completed the journey? Most people gave up half way, afraid that they were going in the wrong direction. Often the guides themselves were misguided.

Man had always asked himself certain fundamental questions. Who was he? Where had he come from? Where was he going? What was his relationship to the things he found himself surrounded by? Who was responsible for his actions? He himself? Some thought they had found the answers and gave up their search. But there were others who did not feel satisfied with the answers they had been given. Their search continued.

Men who had the answers were born from time to time. There were the prophets who passed on the word of God to man. Those who believed in them felt that they had found truth and light. There were other prophets who rejected the spiritual answers and explained history in terms of materialism. They denied the existence of God and ended up forming their own church.

Then there were those who claimed that the answer lay within man himself. The discovery must be made through an inner journey. These men were called existentialists, though there were some among them who accepted the existence of God, as there were others who affirmed their faith in materialism.

Bulleh Shah was an existentialist in so many ways akin to Kierkgaard. All mystic poetry was concerned with internal rather than external stimuli. Bulleh Shah wrote:

In the beginning was I
And it was I in the end
No other I know

No other wisdom I recognize
But do I know who I am?

This search for identity, this passion to know oneself, was a characteristic of his poetry. He considered himself apart from all religions, creeds, races and colours. He wrote:

I am neither a man of God
Praying in a mosque
Nor am I in error like those
Who deny God
I am neither pure nor profane
Neither Moses nor the Pharaoh
Who then am I, Bullya?

Bulleh Shah believed that it was essential to liberate oneself from dogma, narrow-mindedness and prejudice.

If I speak untruth, I can survive
But if I speak the truth
It is explosive

In another poem he had transcended factional and sectarian divisions.

One is called Ram Das
Another Fateh Mohammad
And that is the old argument
But in the end
It turns out truth lay elsewhere
The Muslim is afraid to burn
The Hindu dreads the grave
But both perish

So what was the answer, the prisoner asked himself?

Bulleh Shah, two hundred years before the European existentialists, had expressed the essence of the creed. He had affirmed

individual freedom and choice and concluded that an individual alone was competent to accept or reject a given attitude.

But what happened after that? If man came to know his true self, did it enable him to know the people or common humanity? And if self-knowledge did not lead to it, then what was its value? A man needed to be more than an island. An island in the middle of raging seas was without significance. Some men made themselves into islands because of a desire to protect themselves against the sea of humanity. Was Bulleh Shah one such man? He did not like to think that. He analysed various other mystics and could not help concluding that they were islands unto themselves. Was this approach valid today? Was it socially responsible?

To him it appeared that the ultimate truth lay in submerging your ego into the ocean of the much vaster ego of common mankind. That was the only thing that mattered, had meaning. 'The people come first. They are the only reality. The individual must sacrifice his ego and identity to the larger interests of humanity,' he said.

The nightingale flew off his shoulder and perched itself between the bars.

The gaol clock struck one.

19

> Each of us places his person to his entire capabilities under the supreme guidance of the will of the people and we receive each individual member into our bodies as an indivisible part of the whole.
>
> Rousseau

Mai Laddhi was given a warm welcome by the women prisoners. They were impressed by the fact that she had been arrested and thrown into gaol because she had defied the government by demonstrating in the streets. The pregnant woman was beside herself with joy since Mai Laddhi's arrival. She waited excitedly for the moment when her child would be born.

Mai Laddhi was given a wad of thick and coarse thread every morning to be untangled and returned in the evening rolled into a neat ball. She spent hours sorting out the mess. A few days later, she was given a spinning wheel and ordered to work it all day. And while the old woman spun her wheel, the other inmates would sit around her and sing together. The work was hard and had callused her hands but she was happy. The women would sing:

> My spinning wheel moves
> And I say a silent prayer
> May the woman who spins
> And the girls who help her

Live long and ever
The body is like a stringed instrument
And my heart is captured by love
The world to me is bridal red
Like my spinning wheel

Every woman prisoner subjected to this form of gaol labour was given a kilogram of rough material every morning to spin into fine thread. The task was arduous and slow, but the women performed it under the guidance of the old woman who had already taught them this ancient craft. They would sit under an old pipal tree and feel nostalgic about old times when they, as girls, would throw a swing across a tree and fly through the air. They would sing the songs of those early years:

My spinning wheel moves
And I say a silent prayer
Ranjha the lover has stolen my heart away
And now red is the whole universe
Red like my spinning wheel

Then they would sing together again and again the immortal refrain:

Behold nature's indifference
It places a crown on the head of a prisoner
And blesses a poor woman with a child
Destined to become the envy of the world

At that moment, it seemed to them that the gaol and the gaolers, the courtyards and the cells, the warders and their rounds, the trees and walls and the very fact of their confinement had become supremely irrelevant. The pregnant woman would run her hand over her protruding belly and say, 'Everything is now red, inside and outside. I bask in the blessings of my mystic lover.'

The pregnant woman looked up at the moon one night and she had a vision. She saw an old woman spinning her wheel.

'Mai Laddhi, Mai Laddhi!' she cried.

The moon, it seemed to her, was suspended over the condemned cell where the prisoner was, its silver rays bathing it in an ethereal glow.

20

> The book is written, the die is cast
> Let it be read now or by posterity
> I care not which.
>
> Kepler

The head warder in charge of the condemned cell lit a cigarette. The matchstick singed his finger a bit. To relieve the discomfort, he put it into his mouth. He felt better. He glanced at the prisoner who was pacing up and down his cell. His lips were moving but the warder could not hear anything.

The warder thought of the men who not long ago had poured oil over their bodies and set fire to themselves. He could not imagine, though he tried to, what pain those men must have undergone when the flames enveloped their bodies. He was still feeling a slight burning sensation on his finger. He could not understand how a man could set himself on fire. They must be exceptional people, he said to himself. No greater sacrifice was possible.

The prisoner was still talking to himself. Still pacing up and down. 'All for the people, all for the people' he was saying repeatedly. Power, state, society, economics were all meaningless. If they had a meaning, it was in the context of the masses. He had rejected the old movements, ancient interpretations, antiquated formulas which no longer provided the answers. Only the people had the truth and the answers. Whatever was linked

to the people had meaning. Otherwise it was an absurdity. He was leaving his legacy in the hands of the people and he would wait in the nothingness that lay beyond life to hear their voices proclaim victory. All they had to lose were their chains.

When his black warrant was issued, he was asked to file a mercy petition and he had answered. 'What petition and to what government? What mercy to be sought and for what crime?' His petition lay in the court of the people. And what was his petition? Take revenge against your enemies. He did not believe in revenge as it was understood. To him, it was a negative passion. His vision of the people's revenge lay in their liberation from oppression. It was easy to hang individuals and it could even calm passions for a while; but the important thing was to fight for freedom and gain it. The people who were poor and hungry had to fight and overcome the class of exploiters which had always ruled them. They had to change the system. The answer did not lie in renouncing the world. The time of the mendicant in black robes and beads around his neck was gone. You needed to have your finger on the trigger of a gun. He involuntarily moved his finger as if to push that trigger.

The prisoner had been asked by those up above whom he wished to see before his death. And he had answered. 'You only want to meet those who are not near. I am close to all those I love and they are close to me. Why do we have to meet?'

He was asked if he would wish to make a will. 'My will is enshrined in the hearts of the people,' he had said.

They had felt puzzled at this strange prisoner who neither wished to meet his close ones before dying nor write a will.

He picked up a bit of earth from the floor and put it into his mouth. 'This is the only thing which is real, the earth.' He felt as if his mind were suffused with a new light and the earth he had just swallowed was already shot through with roses.

He had bequeathed everything to his people, he thought. Then he looked up at this ceiling and counted the beams. There were eight. He decided to bequeath them too.

'To the eight men who immolated themselves,' he said.

There were one hundred bricks plastened together on the floor.

'To those who were lashed a hundred times,' he said.

He counted the bars. Ten.

'To the ten thousand political prisoners,' he said.

The four walls he dedicated to the four provinces of his country.

He could see a sliver of moon through his ventilator. He dedicated it to Mai Laddhi.

The pitcher of water, he dedicated to the children.

His threadbare blankets, he dedicated to the children who were in their mothers' wombs.

He felt strangely at ease now. He looked at the nightingale, 'And you I dedicate to myself, because you have filled my empty days with love.'

The head warder was watching the prisoner. His finger did not burn any more. He wondered what sort of a man this was for whose sake so many had turned their bodies into cinders.

How indifferent is nature's generosity
Which confers kingship on prisoners
Truly, such men will live!

The gaol clock struck two.

21

We are the martyrs of an immortal cause.
Napoleon

In the morning when they came for him – Lorca – he understood immediately that they were taking him on the Pasco – the walk of death.
Enzo Cobelli
Garcia Lorca

Since 'Z', the musician, the painter and the political worker were kept in separate cells, they had devised a novel method of communication.

The political worker would bang on his wall and shout, 'Jeevey, jeevey' – long live. . . .

The musician would bang his wall with both hands and sing in a high, resonant voice, 'Jeevey, jeevey.'

The painter would repeat the lusty refrain and Mai Laddhi would spin her wheel a little faster and shout the slogan.

The pregnant woman would run her hand over her belly and sing 'Jeevey, jeevey' as if it were a lullaby.

And the message would reach 'Z'. He would raise his left finger and with it inscribe on the wall 'Revolution. Revolution'.

'Z' was informed that a special court had been constituted to try him. He was told to get ready for his hearing.

22

> It is an essential part of the justice dispensed here that you should be condemned not only in innocence but also in ignorance.
>
> Franz Kafka
> *The Trial*

> Lorca died in the month of August 1936 from war wounds, his body having been found on the twentieth day of the same month on the road from Viznar to Alfacar.
>
> Lorca's death certificate, drawn up by civil servants of the new regime

The 'special court' had two members – one in a uniform, the other a religious judge with a beard.

'Z' was produced before them in handcuffs.

He was not allowed to have a lawyer, nor was he given a list of the witnesses who were to appear against him.

The uniformed officer began the proceedings.

'You are charged with conspiracy to murder. Do you plead guilty or do you profess innocence?'

'Who was murdered?' 'Z' asked.

'Don't you know? You are the accused murderer. Don't you know who the victim was?'

'Do you know who the victim was?'

'Absolutely!'

'Do you also know who murdered him?'

'Yes, we know the principal murderer accused.'

'Then why don't you punish him?'

'This court has been constituted just for that purpose.'

'Have you already decided that the punishment is to be awarded?'

The uniformed man looked at the religious judge, cleared his throat and said, 'There are legal formalities to be fulfilled. We wish to give you every opportunity to speak in your defence.'

'What law and what defence are you talking about?'

'The law of this country and your defence against the murder charge.'

'Is there a law in this country?'

'Absolutely.'

'Has this court been constituted under that law?'

'Perhaps.'

'Absolutely or perhaps?'

The uniformed man was getting angry. He said to 'Z', 'Do you have anything to say in your defence?'

'Since I do not know who has been murdered, how can I say anything in my defence?'

'In other words, you admit your crime.'

'What crime and what admission?'

'That settles it. You are confessing to the murder. You can be punished.'

'You may do so.'

The uniformed officer looked at the man in the beard, who said to 'Z', 'The prosecuting inspector will now read the case against you. You are advised to answer the charges.'

'I am prepared to answer nothing.'

The uniformed judge motioned to the inspector, who opened a file and began to read.

'According to the first information report lodged with the police, 'Z' hatched the murder conspiracy.'

'The benefit of the doubt now goes to the prosecution,' 'Z' murmured.

'You are not to interrupt,' the uniformed judge told him.

The prosecuting inspector continued to read from his file.

'Z' looked up at the bearded man.

'You are a Rasputin with your long beard and bulging eyes. You have always persecuted the people by siding with the kings. You knew how to cure haemophilia; now we will bleed you.'

The man in uniform was yawning. The man in the beard was trying to look busy by fiddling with some papers. The prosecuting inspector was reading from his file.

'Z' looked at the one in uniform.

'Sharpen your arrows, Dulya.'

'Wave your gun in the air, Ram Mohammad Singh Azada!'

'Place the bomb in your hand, Bhagat Singha.'

The 'court' asked the inspector to stop. 'Are you listening to the detailed allegations against you?' they asked 'Z'.

'I was thinking about Kafka's Joseph "K".'

'Who is he?' the uniform asked the beard.

'Never heard of him. Must be a miscreant.'

The uniformed judge waved to the inspector, asking him to continue.

'Z' began to read in a low voice lines from a poem he had written on the death of a friend.

> You may not say so, my friend
> But you are Kafka's 'K'
> You were not charged
> But they tried you nevertheless
> You were without guilt
> Like Dreyfus and the Rosenbergs

'What gibberish is that! Listen to the charges.'

'He must be composing poetry. You know who he is,' the bearded man said.

'I was reciting some lines of poetry.'

'What have they got to do with the case?'

'What has the case got to do with me?'

'You are charged with murder.'

'Who are my accusers?'

'The other party.'

'Who is the other party?'

'Who had their man murdered.'

'Who was murdered and who is the murderer?'

'Shut up,' the uniformed man said. He made a sign to the inspector to continue. The inspector went back to his file, reading mechanically like a robot.

'Z' suddenly became angry. He told the inspector to stop and said to the 'court': 'Do not read the details of the case to me. You go ahead and announce the judgement which has already been written for you.'

'Are you not going to say anything in your defence?' the uniformed judge asked.

'Are you not going to cross-examine the prosecution?' the bearded judge asked.

'No. No. No.'

'We don't care whether you are listening or not. Legal formalities have to be fulfilled.'

The inspector resumed his monologue like a toy that has been wound up and released.

'Z' began to recite another poem under his breath. He was completely disinterested in the proceedings.

There is a lot we have taken
But we can take it no longer
There is an end to injustice and pain
There is an end to tolerance
You slashed our throats with blunt knives
You chopped off our tongues
You put spikes through our eyes
You poured molten lead into our ears
You broke our arms
And threw us into a blind well
But we bore it all in silence
Many times words came to our lips
But we never spoke them

You took us for dumb statues
You tried to put an end to our lives
With every means known to you
But we will take no more
We will fight you back now
With more strength than yours
Watch out
Here comes the first blow

'Z' raised his arm as if he was going to throw something at his accusers. His handcuffs clunked together. At that precise moment, the inspector folded up his papers. He had finished.

'That concludes the prosecution case.'

'Good – the judgment will be announced in half an hour. The accused refuses to offer a defence which means that he admits the crime,' the uniform said.

'Z' was led out of the court for half an hour.

He was brought back.

The officer in the uniform started to read the judgment.

'The prosecution's case has been proved beyond the shadow of any reasonable doubt. The accused has failed to defend the charge. He has been found guilty of conspiracy to murder. He is hereby sentenced to death by hanging. He will be hanged by his neck until such time that all signs of life have disappeared from his body.'

'Z' looked at the uniformed man . . . he was smiling.

'Z' looked at the bearded man . . . he was smiling.

The two members of the 'special court' walked out. 'Z' was taken back to the gaol. On the way, he remembered some lines he had once read somewhere. Lines by the Hungarian poet Pëtofi.

God, make a tree which filters light
Which stands against raging storms unmoved
Or those mountain rocks
Which shake and tremble but are steadfast
If slaves chained in iron only knew their power

If only they were to cast off their yoke
And hold high their loyal swords
And with blood in their eyes
Inscribe against a flag
'For the freedom of mankind'
I will die a happy man
Pronouncing a thousand curses on the bondage of man
My young heart will shed the last drop of its blood

'Z' was led through the gaol courtyard.

'"Z" is being put in the condemned cell.'

There was an uproar among the inmates.

His handcuffs were not removed. He was led to the condemned cell and locked up.

'Z' now was a death prisoner.

23

> My accusers, then, as I maintain, have said little or nothing that is true, but from me you shall hear the whole truth.
>
> Plato
> *The Apology of Socrates*

The condemned prisoner felt free now and happy, lightened of many burdens, clear in his mind about fundamental questions. He had renounced a great deal and gained emotional and intellectual lucidity.

He felt like a man who had dug a piece of barren earth, cleaned the soil, added compost to it, watered it, divided it into neat beds, sowed the seeds and was now waiting for the soil to produce life. Plants and flowers and lush trees. He was prepared to die. He had paid his bill. He had met his debts.

What lay ahead was between God and himself. He felt that he had already spoken to God through the people. But he felt excited by what was to come. A face-to-face meeting with the knower of all secrets.

He sat down on the floor, legs folded. He placed the nightingale on his thigh. He bent his head down, shut his eyes, clenched his teeth, and began to address God – in silence.

'Dear God, I do not turn my face towards the sky because I am not going to beg You. I speak to You with my eyes glued to Your earth. My lips will not move because I know there is

no need for it. I communicate with You without intercession. You are the knower of the soul.

'I need not speak to You. You are privy to the secrets of my being. You will know what I wish to say.'

He sat like that for a long time. Was God wading through his soul now, he wondered. He felt uneasy, a fleeting kind of uneasiness. Perhaps God had paid no attention to him. Did He not understand the language of silence?

'All right. I will speak to You then,' he said. He rose from the ground, walked up to the front of his cell, carefully placed the nightingale between the bars, turned his face towards the sky and began to speak.

The gaol clock struck three.

Time had ceased to have any meaning for him.

'Dear God,' he said, 'You are the giver of life and to You we return after death. But I ask You, has my task on earth reached its end that You have sent for me?

'I do not want to say to You that I am without guilt. You know that I come to You carrying no burden but that of my innocence. But there is something that troubles me. Why is it Your will that only those who are Your servants should undergo travail on earth. I know that the limit of Your forbearance is infinite, but there should be an end even to infinity.

'Dear God, You are all-knowing and You know that I tried to serve Your poor. I tried to give them respect so that they should walk Your earth with heads held high. I lifted them from the ground and made them stand up. I tried to fight social injustice and bring an end to iniquity. I said farewell to comfort so that I could teach Your poor how to live a brave new life. I tried to fight the dark forces of oppression, injustice and hate. I tried to do everything which was acceptable in Your eyes. But what has been my reward? This seven-by-nine-foot death cell?

'Dear God, I do not beg You to spare my life, because I shall always live in the hearts of the people. My footprints shall guide them to their salvation.

'But dear God, tell me only this. Had I finished the crusade

of the poor that I had begun? I was still half-way. There was so much to be done. Why did You take my life in the middle of my journey?

'My God, I am on my way but who will look after Your children, the poor? Naked, hungry, sick, defenceless and handicapped.

'I ask nothing for myself, but I extend my hands in supplication to You on behalf of Your neglected children – the poor.'

He felt tears well up in his eyes. He moved away from the bars he had been resting his head against.

He sat down on the floor. He wanted to move his lips but words would not come to them.

Suddenly, his voice rose, 'The people come first. The people come first. The rest is vanity.'

The nightingale spread its wings.

The gaol clock struck four.

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I tell you, my executioners, that as soon as I am dead, vengeance shall fall upon you with a punishment far more painful than your killing me.

*

Now it is time that we were going, I to die and you to live; but which of us has the happier prospect, is unknown to anyone but God.

Plato
The Apology of Socrates

At twenty-five minutes past four, the head warder and the *chotta sahib* came to the death cell. 'Give him some water for bathing and fresh clothes to wear,' the *chotta sahib* said to the warder. Then he left.

'I do not need to bathe. I am in a state of purity,' the prisoner said.

'To bathe before your time is a custom,' the warder replied.

'I believe in no customs.'

He kicked the earthen pitcher. It broke into many pieces.

'I do not wish to change. My people are preparing red garments for me. When they are ready, I will change into them,' the prisoner said.

The *sahib*, the *burra* and *chotta sahibs*, the head warder, the magistrate, the doctor and the hangman now stood around the scaffold.

Two warders led him out of his cell.

They tried to hold him by the arms, but he shook them off.

The nightingale was perched on his left hand.

He walked up to the scaffold.

The hangman moved forward.

'Wait,' the prisoner said to him. He untied the bird's string. Then he kissed the nightingale. 'Today, you are free,' he said.

It flew off into a tree and sat on one of the branches.

The hangman tied his hands behind his back, put the noose around his neck and the black hood over his head and face.

At that moment, floating over the death cells, the prison barracks, the torture chambers and the women's wards, came the cry of a new-born child.

The nightingale flew off the tree and over the wall.

The *sahib* gave the sign and the hangman pulled the lever.

FAKHAR ZAMAN is a statesman and journalist whose novels and poetry were banned by the Pakistani government of General Zia-ul-Haq. A young leader of the Pakistani People's Party, the author was a close associate of the late Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and a member of the Senate of Pakistan until the dissolution of the Parliament by the army junta in 1977. He has also worked with Nusrat Bhutto as her political adviser.

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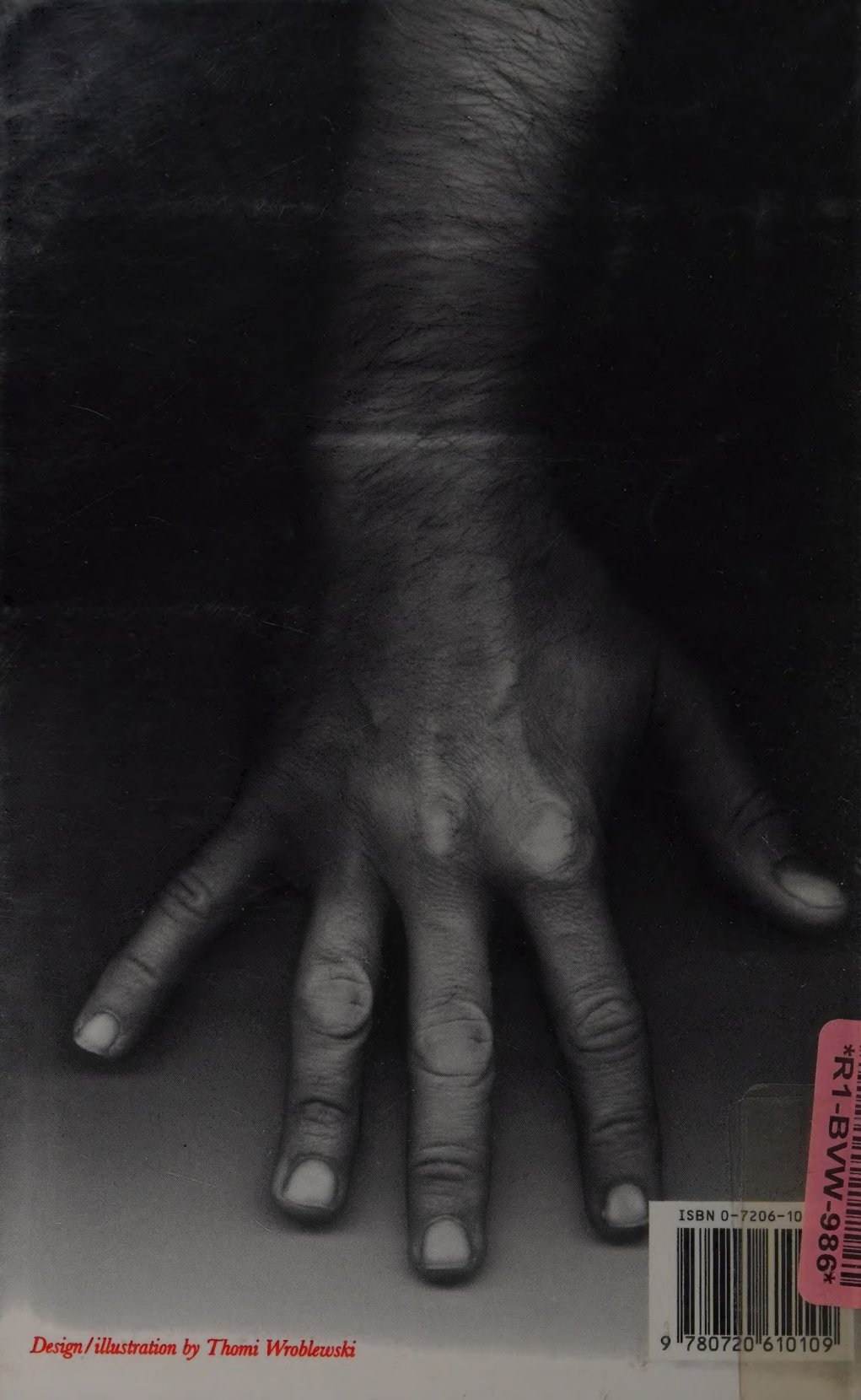

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