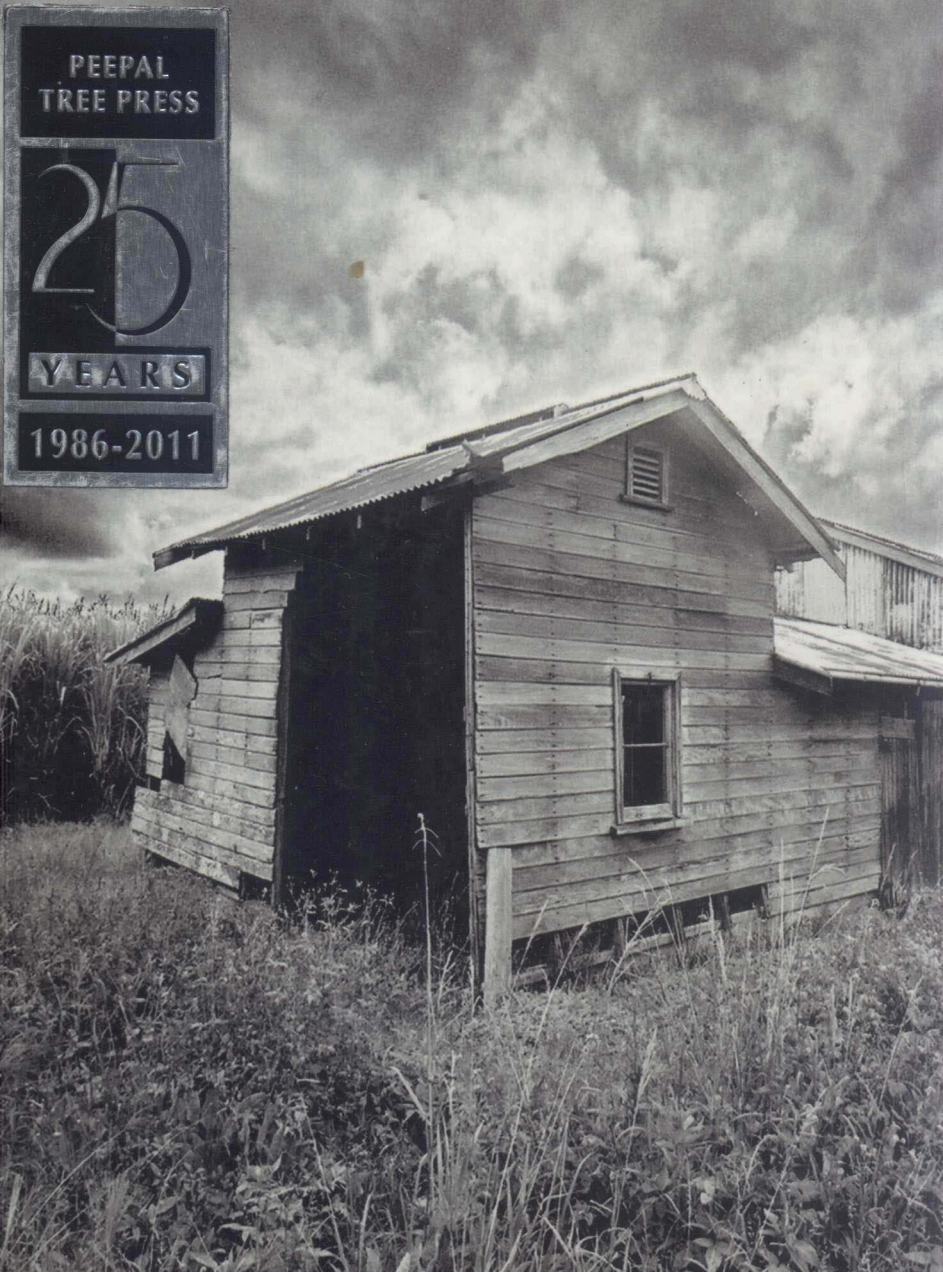


PEEPAL
TREE PRESS

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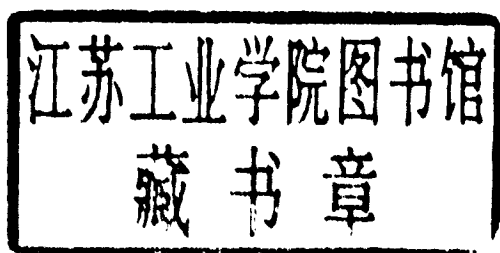
1986-2011



The Intended

DAVID DABYDEEN

THE INTENDED



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DAVID DABYDEEN

THE INTENDED



P E E P A L T R E E

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Shaz knew more about sex than any of us boys and it was his erudition which drew me to him. At an early age he was versed in mysterious acronyms and abbreviations like CP, DOM, SUB, 'O' and 'A' levels, DIY, AC/DC, etc. Compared to Nasim, Shaz was positively brilliant. It was Nasim who startled me one day as we were waiting for a No. 88 bus at Tooting Bec Station by declaring that babies were born through the anus. He was adamant on the point and scoffed at my dissent. Even I, a complete virgin, knew that babies were born up-front, though the precise mechanism was still extremely puzzling.

Shaz was our oracle on this and other matters of a similar nature. Although curiously respected by us for his treasury of natural knowledge, he was despised by his father – an accountant's clerk – who never tired of calling him a dunce. The problem was that they were a Pakistani family, and therefore the arts and culture were not deemed worthy of study at school or university. What mattered were the sciences, medicine, law and computing. Accordingly, Shaz's elder brother took mostly science subjects for 'O' and 'A' levels (the G.C.E. examinations that is) and went on to study engineering at Aston University. The elder sister also trained as a scientist and became a micro-biologist. Shaz's interest, however, was in the arts and for this he was heartily cursed by the entire family, including his mother, even though she could hardly read and write, add or subtract. The boy fancied poetic words and modern images. He amassed a collection of rock L.P.s and was fascinated by the surrealistic cover designs, splashes of electronically processed colours forming weird patterns and shapes: the contours of breasts and other half-glimpsed parts of

the female body, futuristic animals in a dreamy landscape, huge boulders breaking and crashing into a river of molten ice, and his favourite of all – a huge black creature, half-man, half-bird, squatting over a nest of white eggs, enveloping them protectively in its broad wings, whilst from the edge of the frame the sinister barrel of a gun protruded. The back of the record sleeve contained poetic utterances, snatches of lyrics equally mysterious: 'I am an athlete of the Universe/Time lingers melancholy like a hearse', and so forth. He wanted badly to learn to play the guitar and compose his own music. His father called him a pansy.

I first met him at school during one lunch-break. He was in the company of his friend, Patel, taking no part in the adolescent skirmish of the playground. The white boys were howling and spinning around a football, or lashing out with cricket-bats, whilst Shaz and Patel stood against a wall watching. It was my first week at an English school and feeling isolated from the gang warfare I gladly sought out their company. Nasim, recently arrived from Pakistan, also gravitated in their direction and the four of us found ourselves together each school-break. It was the regrouping of the Asian diaspora in a South London schoolground. Shaz, of Pakistani parents, was born in Britain, had never travelled to the sub-continent, could barely speak a word of Urdu and had never seen the interior of a mosque. Nasim was more authentically Muslim, a believer by upbringing, fluent in his ancestral language and devoted to family. Patel was of Hindu stock, could speak Gujarati; his mother, who once visited the school to bring her other son, wore a sari and a dot on her forehead. I was an Indian West-Indian Guyanese, the most mixed-up of the lot. There we were together in our school blazers and ties and grey trousers, but the only real hint of our shared Asian-ness was the brownness of our skins. Even that was not uniform. Patel was Aryan, tall, fair-skinned, crisp and cared-for in appearance. He wore his clothes with a self-certainty, and I have always suspected that deep down he felt superior to the rest of us. Shaz was stoutly built, shabbily dressed and extremely black; Nasim, slim, was two shades darker than Patel and two shades less immaculate. I, the medium to dark brown West-Indian, was merely clumsy in my schoolclothes. The jacket seemed too heavy, it scratched my skin

everywhere, the tie choked my neck, the trousers flapped around my ankles and the shoes swallowed up my feet.

We were varied too in our different gifts. Patel was a slow learner in the classroom, always seeking to dodge the teacher's eye by sitting at the back and hiding behind the boy in front. He would blush and sweat and almost tremble when caught and asked to answer a question. His true talent, however, lay in pickpocketing, where the speed of his fingers appeared to contradict the sloth of his brain. He would practise his craft in the crowded school corridors, deftly lifting a handkerchief or packet of cigarettes from some boy's blazer and putting it into another's. He never took anything for himself, merely being content with the artistry of his performance. Moving from one lesson to another meant changing classrooms, and in the process Patel would be redistributing our possessions. It became an obsession with him and quickly earned him the nickname 'Pocket Patel' which served to identify him from the several other Patels in the school. There was 'Cricketer Patel', for example, whose cunning spin bowling matched his enigmatic, introspective character. He was intensely secretive, with no known friends, and outside of the school no one knew where he lived, no one ever met him in the streets. And 'Chemistry Patel', a quiet boy who was transformed into a showman in the lab when it came to mixing chemicals and balancing equations, and who went on to take a first at Cambridge. This Patel spoke English badly and therefore kept quiet on most issues to do with boyhood or school-life, preferring to smile broadly at anything said to him as if understanding perfectly. What he lacked in the English language was overabundantly compensated for by his brilliant literacy in scientific formulae. 'Pocket Patel', though, was our favourite because he gladly instructed us in the art of theft. It was his only opportunity of leadership. Shaz took the role of victim, Patel the master, Nasim and I the pupils. Patel would move up to Shaz, talk to him, all the time feeling for his pocket, manoeuvring him into a position where his pocket became vulnerable. After this rehearsal we would be invited to perform, and he would patiently coach us as we fumbled about Shaz's body. However much we practised, though, we could not match Patel's dexterity, which secretly pleased him.

What also endeared Patel to us was his fund of knowledge about films. Stupid as he was in the classroom, he possessed an outstanding knowledge of Hollywood and had seen material that was barred to us. He went to every film at the local cinema at least once, but especially the 'X'-rated ones, for he was tall enough to pass for eighteen and, more importantly, his cousin was a ticket-seller. The cinema was some ten minutes' walk from the school. I passed it every day, gazing at its poster displays of semi-naked flesh smeared with lipstick, wishing I were Patel. Through the glass doors I could see the auditorium with its hot-dog kiosk and ticket office, and beyond that two thick, padded doors, guarded by a uniformed usherette, behind which lay the amphitheatre of unspeakable pleasures. It would be a trial of strength, a test of masculinity, to overcome all the obstacles between the glass door and the padded doors; to walk through the brightly-lit auditorium, buy a ticket casually, avoiding the knowing eyes of the ticket-seller and, as you passed the kiosk, pretend not to see the smirk on the face of the attendant; as you carelessly handed your ticket to the young usherette, try desperately not to notice the loose button on her blouse that exposes a morsel of breast; she tears the ticket and the noise is enormous, like the rending of a veil, but you attempt a smile, seeming to hear nothing and waiting for an eternal moment for the half-ticket, all the time pressurised by the memory of her body, the scent of it. You push the door and with a sense of immense relief you find it actually opens, and you stumble nonchalantly over a bubble in the carpet towards the deliciousness of a dark amphitheatre; your first, automatic reaction to the darkness is to cough, as if to locate your body, to ensure that it came with you and was not left abandoned in the foyer. I began to admire the courage of Patel, his meeting with an unknown darkness.

Of the group it was only Nasim who harboured a secret dislike of Patel, a feeling I suspect that was grounded in ancient Muslim-Hindu hostilities. There was no end of bickering between them when war broke out in 1971 between India and Pakistan on the issue of Bangladesh. None of us understood the global reasons for the conflict but we were thrilled and appalled by newsreels of carnage in the jungle. The Irish were simultaneously blowing up

the streets of Belfast on television, and there was probably a connection between the two theatres of war but we didn't know quite what. Primitive feelings of loyalty began to emerge from our ignorance, so that Patel suddenly rediscovered his Indianness in a mannish surge of pride, especially when Pakistan was on the retreat, and Nasim was glum for days, refusing to speak to any of us. Shaz did not take sides, being almost wholly Anglicised. He was into rock music, and when George Harrison organised a concert in aid of flood-afflicted Bangladesh Shaz bought the record. (The English children in the mean time had composed their own cruel lyric about Bangladesh, a variation of the tune of 'riding along on the crest of a wave'...) His father thumped him one day when he played it too loudly and confiscated his record-player. This was Shaz's only involvement in the sub-continental war. I favoured Patel; being once a Hindu, my mind had been indelibly stained by the old Guyanese Hindu proverb about 'never trusting a fulla-man'. In all my years of boyhood in Guyana I had never once been assaulted or betrayed by a Muslim, yet the old suspicion lurked mysteriously in my mind like a lust waiting to be revealed and gratified.

To nobody's surprise a fight broke out in the playground between Patel and Nasim. For weeks they had been squabbling, refusing to pass the ball to each other in our football skirmishes, or colliding deliberately in chasing after it. One lunch-time, Patel, in full pursuit of glory, swerving past one defender, then another, the goal-mouth yawning before him, was tripped up from behind by an awkward thrust of Nasim's foot. He fell headlong, hitting his face against the brick wall. The game stopped. We watched Patel crumpled against the wall as if dead. Nasim stood a few yards away, his hands plunged in his blazer pockets as if hiding them from sight. He could not bear to look at us, or at Patel. He hoped he was invisible but all eyes were focused on him accusingly. Patel suddenly uncoiled, leapt up and hit out blindly, cuffing a startled Nasim on his face. They both fell, jerking and tearing at each other. We surrounded them and after allowing a reasonable period for the play of passions (two or three of the more bloodthirsty among us were in fact eagerly spurring on the combatants) we coaxed them apart. From Nasim's

point of view – not that he would have had any, for his eyes were badly swollen – it was a fortunate intervention. That same evening the television flashed news of the surrender of Pakistan. Patel had won the fight and the war.

From that moment it seemed that defeat was Nasim's fate. A series of calamities befell him, and he failed his English G.C.E. examinations that year when we all passed – even Patel.

Patel's uncle had written out for him two long descriptive passages: the first heralding dawn, the sun hanging like a fat gold watch in a pocket of cloud; the second, evening, the moon smearing the sky in a glaucous green. These passages were gorged with sweetmeats selected from *Roget's Thesaurus*: splendid adjectives like 'iridescent', 'pristine' and 'sepulchral'. All Patel had to do was to memorise the two passages. In opening his essay, whatever the topic set by the examiner, he would use the dawn description, and he would close in a burst of lyricism about dusk. For the middle of the essay he was abandoned to his own devices. His uncle warned him to pad out the middle with a simple story and not to hazard the use of dimly familiar polysyllabic words, of which Patel claimed, out of wounded pride, to know one or two. The rest of us shuffled nervously into the examination room, but Patel was swishing with confidence, his head singing with the poetry of nature. We opened our examination sheets with some fear, nausea welling up in our stomachs, one or two of us already on the brink of fainting. Patel didn't even bother to read his sheet, merely turning it over and looking at it to follow procedure and avoid suspicion. As soon as the invigilator bellowed 'Begin', Patel began to fill the page, pouring out his exquisite soul, its emotions recollected in the tranquillity of the examination room. He scribbled vigorously in case he had a lapse of memory between one sentence and another. It was only after he had exhausted the dawn chorus that he wiped his brow from the effort and turned to the examination sheet, hoping to find an essay title that would fit the opening paragraph. And there it was, a gift of a title, or so it seemed, since it was obviously about nature: 'Tiger! Tiger! burning bright/In the forests of the night'. He could hardly suppress a whoop of relief as he settled down to the challenge of an unknown middle passage which would end in familiar moon-

light. It was after he had stumbled through two or three sentences and studied the question again for clues to inspiration that panic seized him. 'In the forests of the *night*' ... Fuck! They wanted the tiger described in the night-time, whereas he had begun his essay in daylight. What was he going to do? He chewed his pen for a full minute, glancing around to see what Nasim and the rest of his friends were up to, until the solution burst upon him like the very dawn in his opening paragraph: he would switch the memorised passages, starting with the moon like an aged spinster and black witch radiating light like the filaments of her broomstick, and culminating with the sun burnishing the clouds as it rose from the horizon's edge. The tiger would be hunted by men bearing torches and riding an elephant because it had snatched an Indian village baby whilst the family were asleep. It would be caught and killed early the next morning, and the meat given to the Untouchables to keep them happy in their tasks of emptying the garbage and weeding the roadside since only they were cannibalistic enough (Patel seemed to remember his mother saying this) to eat man-eating animals. He put pen to paper once again, congratulating himself for his cleverness in manoeuvring out of a tight spot ('unlike that bloody stupid tiger', he thought), imagining the surprised look on his uncle's face when he told him of the predicament and ingenious solution.

The shame of failing his examination further alienated Nasim, especially since he had always considered himself brighter than Patel. He became more and more aloof, and the group of four eventually dwindled to three. Then one day he failed to attend school. No one thought much of it. It was only as the days passed that we began to query his absence. A full week had gone by before Patel brought the news to us in the playground. His mother had met Nasim's mother in Tooting market and sobbed out the story. Nasim was in hospital. One night, returning home with his elder brother from the wedding ceremony of some relative, he had been set upon by five white youths lounging about at the mouth of the underground station, waiting for some action, something to brighten their lives. The youths caught sight of the brothers as they emerged and, emboldened by strength in numbers, taunted them, pushed them about. One or two moved

in for the kill, flinging heavy punches when they sensed panic and helpless terror. Nasim, small-boned and agile, managed to dodge the worst, slip through the ring and sprint away. Four of the youths chased after him but they were fat and clumsy and he maintained a safe distance from them, his feet assuming a life of their own and taking him down unrecognisable backstreets. He saw nothing, felt nothing but a nauseous lightness in his head and the automatic pounding of his feet on tarmac. As he ran his mind told him that he was striking a direction away from his home, for he didn't want to lead the youths there, where his mother was, and his young sister; his father was working nightshift, so the home was vulnerable, with large glass windows and a gate that could easily be kicked down, and the number of the house emblazoned on the outside wall for all to see (a dreadful mistake, he recognised now, which must be put right as soon as all this was over) which meant that they could keep coming back to the house, night after night, Paki-bashing packs of them, and his mother who could not speak English, and didn't know how to call up the police if the brothers were not there, and the father always at work, and other Asians in the street too frightened to come out and shout at the youths and scatter them, and the white neighbours who were nice and always said good-morning, nice-weather-we're-having, how-are-you, have-you-heard-the-latest-cricket-score, but who also had their own children to protect and big windows too, much bigger than theirs. There was a traffic light, it looked like Bedford Hill, he ran across the street, his eyes saw people on the other side, a car screamed about his ears, something slammed against his side.

We visited him on his twelfth day in hospital. His head was wrapped in bandages. The driver had only just braked in time, otherwise Nasim would have been dead. Patel tried to make a joke about how he looked like a Sikh warrior with a turban on. He looked small and lost, like pictures of hungry Third-World children we saw on television. I hated him. A strange desire to hurt him, to kick him, overcame me. Shaz brought him a music magazine and a home-made cake decorated with bright red cherries which his mother had baked specially. I watched him, not knowing what to say, distressed, feeling a bitter contempt,

especially at the sight of his stupid, helpless eyes peeping out between the bandages. He was a little, brown-skinned, beaten animal. His wounds were meant for all of us, he had suffered them for all of us, but he had no right to. It was Nasim's impotence which was so maddening, the shameful of it. I knew immediately that Patel, Shaz and I could never be his friends again, because he had allowed himself to be humiliated. We would avoid him in school because he reminded us of our own weakness, our own fear.

Patel swore with the fervour of renewed brotherhood that he'd catch and tear them apart. The three of us would set upon them once we found out who they were. Shaz and I nodded faintly. Nasim said nothing, just blinked stupidly. Perhaps he couldn't speak anyway. Maybe his jaw was cracked. We left him to his family, several of whom had turned up from as far away as Sheffield. His brother, who had managed to escape with a few minor bruises, hung around us disconsolately, the red stripes on his face like badges of shame. I fancied he looked like Patel's tiger vanquished by the hunt. I was glad to escape the peculiar hospital smell of starch and bleach and medication. In any case, the mother was beginning to rub Nasim's hand and weep, quietly, so as not to disturb the neighbouring patients and their visitors. I was embarrassed for all of us, for the several Asians wrapped in alien, colourful clothes who whispered to each other in a strange tongue and crowded protectively but belatedly around their beaten son. No doubt they presented a right sight to the white patients and guests who kept eyeing them. I was sure I could hear a few giggles. I knew then that I was not an Asian but that these people were yet my kin and my embarrassment. I wished I were invisible.

It was the same feeling of shame that all of us, whether Indo-West-Indians or real Indians, felt at the sight of our own people. Nasim and I who both lived in Balham would often travel home together after school. Whenever an Asian sat next to us on the Tube, dressed in a turban or sari, we would squirm with embarrassment, frozen in silence until the doors opened to release us at our destination. The peculiar environment of the Tube intensified our self-consciousness, especially as there was no view out of

the window to distract our attention. The white English remained utterly silent for the whole journey, hiding behind a newspaper or concentrating on a point in space as if in profound contemplation of the mysteries of nothingness, or else reading and re-reading the advertisements selling pregnancy predictors, fresh-breath capsules, bargain holidays in Spain. Asians were invariably curious about each other, and furtive glances would be exchanged, eyes meeting and withdrawing in an instant as we assessed one another to find out how long since the one sitting opposite arrived in the society, and from which part of the sub-continent, and how he was getting along with the new life. We could not talk to each other openly in the way people in Asia or the Caribbean offered greetings or waved hands, even to utter strangers, as a form of recognition that we were all human beings, and that today the sun was beating down on the one world, a street of which, somewhere in Jamaica, Guyana, India, we happened to be walking down when we met and ceased being strangers for a moment. In the London Underground we were forced into an inarticulacy that delved beneath the stone ground and barrier of language, whether Urdu, Hindi or Creole, and made for a new mode of communication: as the train trundled through a dark tunnel we flashed glances at one another, each a blinding recognition of our Asian-ness, each welding us in one communal identity. In the swift journey between Tooting Bec and Balham, we re-lived the passages from India to Britain, or India to the Caribbean to Britain, the long journeys of a previous century across unknown seas towards the shame of plantation labour; or the excitement with which we boarded *Air India* which died in a mixture of jet-lag, bewilderment and waiting in long queues in the immigration lounge at Heathrow – just like back home, the memory of beggars lining up outside a missionary church for a dollop of food from a white hand, and women with cracked lips crowded at a standpipe shoving enamel bowls to catch the few slow drops. In the glitter of duty-free shops and fluorescent lights you cannot hide the memory of poverty. The thick, unfamiliar feel of carpet in which your waiting feet seem to sink further unsteadies your balance, feet already strapped in unaccustomed shoes and for twelve hours, the time since you first put them on