



# THE HOOGHLY REVIEW

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Issue 1

# *The Hooghly Review*

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### DISCONNECTED

He stood dripping and dishevelled. A big surprise but, somehow, I could hide the initial shock and the delayed recognition.

The insistent doorbell had jolted me from my customary siesta. The shrill sound was echoing in the silent one-room apartment, magnified in the enclosed crowded space, very much like the loud air horns of the vehicles on the street below—high-decibel, irritating and unnecessary but inevitable in an Asian country. Half-dozing, I sprinted to the door and peeped through the key-hole.

The passage was dark. I could see nothing. Curious, I opened the door...and came face-to-face with the shabby caller, rain-drops falling down the cotton shirt, umbrella half-open.

“Sorry,” he said, grinning weakly, a bit preoccupied.

I was taken aback by this unexpected presence—sudden like the Mumbai rains and unexplained—but managed to mask the inner turmoil.

And said nothing.

“May I?” he asked.

“Oh, yes! Come in,” I said, recovering quickly.

He entered sideways, bending his thin small body like a skilled acrobat and careful not to touch me—fidgety as usual but a bit quiet. Just wriggled past my surprised stiff body. He slipped out of his wet sandals, kept the dripping umbrella in the corner, shook his greying close-cropped hair, ran his fingers through them and sat down on the plastic chair—the entire silent sequence executed noiselessly in fast few nano-seconds, eyes tired, and as I recalled later, red.

Slight puddle of water formed instantly beneath his unshod feet. I closed the door. Plopped down on the old sofa before the visitor, unable to express my astonishment, or, any other feeling, in sudden denial—disoriented, in fact by this entry, on a stormy afternoon. We sat there facing each other for a long minute, unable to decide what to say. He was lost...withdrawn.

It was so sudden for me, his appearance in my suburban flat. Outside the seventh-floor window, the heavy July rains were pelting the dark and grey skyline. A dismal setting. The afternoon seemed to drag. There was complete silence in the flat. The rain could be distinctly heard; the pounding fists of fury on the glass, a long hissing in the heavy wind outside; somebody wailing some place, loud and consistent.

“Sorry,” he said. His eyes looked vacant. Face had become gaunt.

“Not at all,” I said, a bit blankly. He did not seem to notice my aloofness.

“I thought I must meet you *today* itself,” he said in a low tone, eyes far-off; emphasis on today.

“Good, you remembered. Nice to see you after so long,” I said, putting on a civil mask quickly.

*He just killed my afternoon nap.*

“Yes, after so long. More than eight years,” he said quietly, lower lip trembling.

“Is it so?” I asked.

“Yes.”

We sat quietly.

He stared ahead, fixedly, at some spot; I, in turn, stared at another spot behind him, on the wall whose paint was peeling off. I could see the dampness spreading there. Time for a fresh coat of paint for the decaying walls.

“I was not sure you would be home. Took a chance,” he said.

I said nothing. He looked down at his hands, a bit remote. His hands were nervous. Clasp and unclasp. Expressing a new nervousness. His eyes looked at me for a second and then looked back.

I could see, for the first time, a strange blankness in his eyes—a void, emptiness, like the desert running down for miles, as bare stretches.

“You, okay?” I asked.

“Yes. Okay.”

We fell quiet again.

“Hope I have not disturbed you,” he said quietly. His eyes searched my face for clues. I was expressionless.

“I thought I must visit you. Had this urge. And urge so strong I did not mind the long commute in this weather,” he said. An explanation, perhaps. I wanted to *react* to him, his

unwanted explanations for a perceived intrusion on my solitary life. I tried desperately for a semblance of some emotion but failed miserably. I just could not muster enough emotion, could not act normally, put off by this apparition.

Something deep prevented me from showing my dormant feeling for this man, clasping-unclasping his hands like some pathetic human figure.

He appeared as something foreign.

“Where are the others?” he asked. His voice had a sad tinge to it that I failed to *notice*—like everything else at that point but could recall vividly, some *five hours* later.

“They are not home.”

“Oh. How are you?” He asked.

“Good.”

He said nothing. His hands moved again, taking on a life, an autonomy of their own, saying something only he could understand. His automatic hands, furling-unfurling in sharp staccato moves, reminded me of that isolated quiet character in Sherwood Anderson’s classic short fiction “The Hands”. His name was, well, I cannot recall right now. Anyway, it does not matter. These days, you do not try to retain the names of your neighbours or junior colleagues. How can you recall a character that is not even historical or living or connected with you anyway? We all suffer from amnesia, cultural, social and individual. Everything, everybody is liable to be deleted, erased and forgotten...soon.

“Have I disturbed your sleep?” he asked sheepishly, voice guilty.

*Yes, you have!* And you know that. Popping up like this—like unwanted messages on the phone!  
“Not at all,” I said, a feeble smile betraying my inner turmoil. He looked at me for a long second and then averted his gaze.

“How are you?” I asked again flatly, trying to sound a bit intimate and warm to the visitor.

“Good, good! I am good,” he said, preoccupied, hands moving, in some other reality. The sudden tremor in his steady low voice and a twitching muscle in the pale thin face contradicted this affirmation for me.

*He is lying again.*

I looked at him closely. He was hunched up, looking at his fingernails. The grey thin hair was receding. The forehead was lined deep. He had reduced a lot over the years. Was wearing a cheap white shirt—maybe bought from a bargain shop or discount sales’ stall in the Fort area known for such shops—and black loose-fitting trousers. The face was devoid

of life, pale and wan, very much like a Dostoevskian character. So were his listless eyes. The pallor has spread to every nook of this long face.

Starved!

That is how he looked to me. The internal dryness reflected on his face. The dryness of a guy eroding slowly in a metro of India—drifting deadwood in the human sea in a stinking crumbling overstretched city of more than a million people surviving on fumes, poisonous air and two decent meals a day. A sub-species of its own. Better than many. Surviving daily battles. Fighting for securities of shelter and food, somehow.

“What brought you here?” I asked. Rather blurted out.

He looked at me fleetingly, averting his troubled gaze.

“To meet you only. What else?” He said innocently. “Felt like seeing you. Remembered you. In fact, remembering you for the last many days. Wanted to say hi and bye!”

His voice was earnest and words came straight from heart.

Genuine!

I felt touched. Something thawed inside.

“Like a cup of masala *chai*?” I asked, a bit friendly. Genuinely, this time. He nodded his head. Just then, my cell beeped.

“Give me a minute,” I said and went inside my bedroom. It took me five minutes to finish my call. After washing my face and adjusting my hair, I returned to my little drawing room and found it *minus* my recent caller.

The chair was empty. The door was closed. The black umbrella was missing. So was the cloth bag that he was carrying and I had noticed later. His sandals were not there. Only the puddle was there as the only evidence of his short sudden unexplained visit and his equally sudden unexplained disappearance. A bit irritated, awake, bored, emptied inside, I looked out of the window but could see only the thick grey rain hissing...

Five hours later, the phone rang.

“Do you know Subhash Kumar of Malad?” A voice asked. Sounded a cop’s voice. I said, yes.

“Who was he to you?”

“Who is calling?” I asked.

“Police inspector, crime branch, Malad.”

“He was my younger brother,” I said.

“Real?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, bad news.”

“Tell me, please!”

“The man committed suicide two hours ago by hanging from the ceiling fan of his rented flat in Mira Road. Neighbours informed us. We found your number in his pocket...”

*Unreal!*

How can it be?

“Hello? You there?” The cop’s voice sounded a bit gentle.

“Yes.”

“Any idea about his family?”

“Sorry! I have no clue.”

“Was he working?”

“No idea.”

“We were told he was fired a few days ago...”

Something snapped.

The inner *numbness* melted and broke down in a hot lava of buried emotions, memories and scents...of earlier happy times, another age and timeline.

Tears began flowing.

I sobbed, miserable, lonely, wretched!

Reality hit with the force of a tornado.

If only I had...

His smile came back.

His timid queries.

Early memories of a shared parental home in Kanpur.

Talks of the future in a big city.

Being together.

brothers.

A family transplanted in another setting—close.

Early idealism.

Of poetry read and recited.

All gone in an irony of circumstances.

“Hello? Are you listening? Hello? Hello?”

The call got *disconnected* abruptly.

Outside the rain increased in fury.

Strangely, I heard his gentle voice again, “...wanted to say hi and bye!”; shadows increased, as a freshly-brewing storm hit the city with complete fury, smashing trees and billboards and telephone lines...and power tripped and went out in a city of automatons busy with phones, reading/deleting messages, each a little island, in the midst of a hungry sea of atomised items and flotsam and jetsam, drifting slowly to some distant obscurity, under a dark sky...



Sunil Sharma, PhD (English), is currently Toronto-based academic, critic, literary editor, and author with 25 published books: Seven collections of poetry; five of short fiction; one novel; a critical study of the novel, and, ten joint anthologies on prose, poetry, and criticism, and, one joint poetry collection. He is, among others, a recipient of the UK-based Destiny Poets’ inaugural Poet of the Year award---2012. His poems were published in the prestigious UN project: *Happiness: The Delight-Tree: An Anthology of Contemporary International Poetry*, in the year 2015. Sunil currently edits the English edition of *Setu Bilingual*.