

THE NIMROD LITERARY AWARDS  
*The Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction*

FIRST PRIZE  
SHOBHA RAO

*Kavitha and Mustafa*

The train stopped abruptly at 3:36 p.m., between stations, twenty kilometers from the Indian border on the Pakistani side. Kavitha looked out of the window, in the heat of afternoon, and saw only scrubland, an endless yellow plain of dust and stunted trees as far as the eye could see. She knew what this meant. One of the men in the berth, the tall one Kavitha had been eying, calmly told the women to take off all their jewels and valuables and put them in their shoes. They'll search *everything*, he said with meaning, which made the young woman in the corner blush. Two or three of the women gasped. The old lady started crying. There were eleven people crowded into their berth, including Kavitha and her husband, Vinod. They were all from Islamabad and had been squeezed onto the wooden benches of this train now for seven hours. There was an older couple who seemed to be traveling with their middle-aged son and his wife. The young woman in the corner was traveling with her mother and older brother. And the tall man was with his son, or so Kavitha presumed, though they looked nothing alike. The boy was not more than eight or nine years old but, of all of them, he seemed to remain the calmest, even more so than his father. He serenely took two thin pebbles, a curled length of twine, and a chit of paper, maybe a photograph, from his pockets and put them in his shoe.

They heard a clamor farther down the train, a few baleful screams, then a series of thuds. Every door would be barred, they all knew, but when they were finished looting the train, Kavitha hoped they would let it continue on as it was. She had heard stories, though: sometimes, they uncoupled the bogies and sent them in different directions. At other times, they forced the men to disembark and allowed the women and children to continue. More than once, she had heard, they boarded with kerosene. Kavitha reached out and took Vinod's hand. It was out of habit, she realized, but it was still a comfort. They had talked of this, now and

then, in the course of their ten-year marriage: which one might die first. Kavitha had always insisted that she wanted to go first, that she could not possibly bear the pain of living without Vinod. But that was a lie. She knew very well she would manage just fine without him, maybe even better than she had with him. Their marriage, arranged by their families when she was sixteen and he twenty-two, aside from one or two instances, had been mostly uneventful. Boring, really. He'd seemed handsome enough on the wedding dais but when she took a long look at him, a week or so after the wedding, his forehead was squat, and his eyes were dull. As the months went by, she noticed that the dullness persisted; his eyes flickered for a moment, maybe two, when he was on top of her, but then they died out again. Dull eyes? Her friends had exclaimed. Just be happy he doesn't beat you. True, true, Kavitha had agreed, but she secretly wondered if perhaps that is what it would take to bring his gaze to life: violence.

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There were four of them. The one who entered the berth first had a distended ear, fanned out like a cabbage leaf, and was clearly the leader. He stepped inside, holding a machete by his side, by the handle, swinging it like a spray of flowers. The others crowded behind him, holding sticks, and one a metal rod. Now there were fifteen in the berth meant for six, the heat growing even more unbearable, and the middle-aged man, the one who was there with his wife and parents, lunged, with a cry, at the metal bars of the train's windows, trying to loosen them. It was pointless. They were welded in place. His wife and mother tried to calm him but he was weeping.

Look, how sweet, the leader said, We have a baby in the berth. The leader smiled serenely, looked at each of them in turn, then put his hand on the shoulder of the man at the barred window and said, Here, let me help you. The man—with a tremulous look, his face stained by tears, his hands and shirtfront stained by the rust from the window—turned and looked at him. Come, come, the leader said, let me show you the way out. He pushed the others aside, and led the man to the door. The man, still shaking, the surprise of being led from the berth hardening into flight, took one quick look at his wife and parents and bolted out of the berth.

Cabbage leaf smiled. You see how easy that was, he said.

They stood in silence.

Would any of *you* like to leave? he asked. A fly buzzed. They waited motionless, as if they had all anticipated the sounds of the scuffle that reached them from the other end of the bogie, followed by a loud thump, a scream, and then a strange and preternatural quiet. The old lady—the mother of the man who'd left the berth—let out a long, piercing wail. Now, now, the leader said, there's no need for that. Then his voice dropped, it grew fangs. Your jewels, he said.

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It was a rainy afternoon. Kavitha was at home, preparing the evening meal of roti and dal with spinach and sweet buttermilk. Vinod was the tax collector for the district of Taxila and was home no later than eight every night. She sweetened the buttermilk because Vinod preferred sweet buttermilk to salty, and she didn't have a preference. In fact, in the time since they'd been married, it seemed to her that she'd lost most of her preferences. She had once liked taking evening walks, but he'd always said he was too tired. She had liked weaving jasmine into her hair, but their scent had made him nauseous. When she noticed fallen eyelashes on her cheeks, she'd put them on the back of her palm, close her eyes, and make a wish. Then she'd blow on them. If they flew away, she liked to think the wish would come true. If not, she'd wait patiently for another eyelash. She'd believed this since she was a child. He noticed her once, collecting the eyelash, blowing it away, and asked her what she was doing. He hardly ever asked her about herself, so Kavitha looked at him, astonished, then talked for ten minutes about the eyelashes, and the wishes, and the waits, sometimes lengthy, for the next one.

Vinod's eyes seemed to flicker—or so she thought—and then he frowned.

What is it? she asked.

That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard, he said. It's just plain silly.

So what? Kavitha said; I'm not asking you to do it. It was the first time she had talked back to him, and she felt good for having done it.

That was when he slapped her. Not hard, but just enough so that she understood. Understood what, she wondered. She looked, in the instant after the slap, into his eyes. They were empty. Not a flicker. Not a sign of anger, or regret, or even satisfaction. She looked down. She, too, felt empty.

That was years ago.

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On this night, after preparing the evening meal, Kavitha sat at the window of their flat. Vinod would be home in an hour. The window was big, and looked out onto a row of facing flats, and most clearly into the flat directly opposite. A young couple lived in it, Kavitha had noticed, and she liked to watch them especially. This was about the time the young husband was due home, and Kavitha waited anxiously for his arrival. It was not that they were ever lewd or inappropriate, or even that they did anything interesting or unusual; it was just that there was such sweetness between them. She could tell just by their gestures, by how they moved, by how their bodies seemed to lighten the moment the other walked through the door. On previous afternoons, she'd noticed that the young wife wore a plain cotton sari during the day and, just before her husband was to arrive, she would change into a more colorful, fancy sari. Today when she emerged from the back room, she had on a yellow sari. Kavitha squinted and thought that it might be chiffon, with a blue border of some sort. The breeze swept up the young woman's pulloo as she walked from room to room. She looked like a butterfly. She looked like the petals of a flower. When the husband arrived, he had clearly brought home snacks to eat with their tea—perhaps pakora or maybe samosas, Kavitha guessed—because the young wife dashed to the kitchen and returned with a plate. Then she went back and, after a few minutes, brought out their teas on a tray. Kavitha watched them with envy. She nearly cried with it.

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Your jewels, he repeated.

The middle-aged wife and the mother of the recently departed man wept silently. It was odd, but it felt like only now, only

after there was one fewer person in the berth, did a pall descend on the group. They moved slowly; the shadow of the train lengthened. The August heat was oppressive. Sweat trickled down their faces, their clothes stuck to their bodies. Flies entered the berth in droves but the passengers were too scared to swat them away, to make any sudden movements. Kavitha licked her lips and tasted salt. Hurry up, the leader said. The three other men were outside the door, standing guard, Kavitha assumed. The leader, though, watched the passengers keenly. Each of the women had left a small piece of jewelry visible, so they wouldn't suspect the ones in their shoes—Kavitha had left her earrings in, the young woman her nosering, the middle-aged woman and the elderly mother a few bracelets. They took them off and placed them in a pile on the wooden bench. Cabbage leaf looked at the pile, shook his head, and laughed. *I know* you have more jewelry than that, he said. When he finished laughing, he said, Would you like me to help you look?

The women glanced from one to the other, then they looked at the men.

Cabbage leaf—whose name was Ahmed; Kavitha had heard one of the men guarding the door call him that—waited patiently. When no one moved, he placed his machete next to the pile, seated himself beside it, and said, I'm going to enjoy this. Then he wrapped his arm around the waist of the young woman standing closest to him, and pulled her onto his lap. Yes, I am, he breathed into her neck, pulling her chunni off her shoulder.

The brother of the young woman lurched forward. His mother caught the very end of his wrist but he slipped out. It didn't seem possible in such a tiny space, with so many people crowded into it, but it felt to Kavitha as if he sailed across the berth, his arms reached out as if to strangle the bandit. But Ahmed was quicker. He swerved to the side, so that the brother landed in a heap against the seat. And in a flash of metal, one of the outside guards, the one with the rod, swung at the brother. All Kavitha heard was the thwack of metal against bone. The brother let out a howl, gripping his arm. Blood spurted from the wound. His mother knelt next to him, using the pulloo of her sari to staunch the blood. It wouldn't stop. It was now covering the floor of the berth, pooling around their shoes.

My shoes, Kavitha thought.

Get him out of here, Ahmed growled, We have enough flies as it is. The guard went into the passageway and yelled for help. Another one of the guards came in, and he and the one with the metal rod dragged the brother out. He whimpered as he left the berth.

You see what happens to heroes, Ahmed said.

Their berth was the last in the bogie, on the far end, next to the lavatories. Kavitha, seated next to the door and directly across from the little boy, caught a glimpse of the tiny steel sink that was used by the passengers to brush their teeth, and it was against this sink that the brother was propped up. Blood was still pouring out of the gash on his arm and she wondered if he might die. She looked up, and the little boy was watching her. There was, she noticed, intention in his gaze, and she looked away only when Ahmed addressed her.

You, the leader said, pointing to Kavitha, Give me that.

She had forgotten about her mangal sutra. She had swapped the gold chain of her wedding necklace for turmeric-soaked thread just before the trip, for safety's sake, but the round lockets were made of gold. How could she have forgotten? She slipped it over her head and handed it to him. Vinod seemed to wince. Was it for her or for the gold? Ahmed bounced it in his palm—the wedding necklace she'd not once taken off in ten years—up and down, up and down, as if weighing the gold. It must still hold the warmth of my skin, she thought. And then she felt a thrill, a rush of heat, flooding her body, to think that a man, any man, held in his hand the warmth of her body.

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The boy was still looking at her. Kavitha couldn't understand it—his stare—but she felt too faint to return it. She hadn't eaten in over seven hours; they had emptied their water bottle three hours ago. She closed her eyes. There had been a pregnancy in Kavitha and Vinod's marriage, but the child had been stillborn. The stillbirth had been a culmination of many years of trying for children, and the next time Vinod had reached for her, an appropriate number of weeks after the failed pregnancy, she had looked at him evenly, a little sadly, and said, Please. No more. In her memory, that was the second instance of a flicker passing across his eyes.

She knew it was unfair — all of it — but she felt gratitude towards Vinod for understanding, for not having touched her since and, in a small way, he had increased, incrementally, her love for him.

When she opened her eyes, Ahmed was by the window. He was searching the bags of the older couple. The many buckles and belts had been hacked off by the machete, but there were still bundles tucked under the wooden seats, and the couple and their daughter-in-law were making matters worse by their distress, by opening and reopening the same bundles and folding and refolding the same clothes. Most of these clothes were now strewn across the berth. Vinod, who was sitting next to Kavitha, reached over and patted her hand, as if to calm her, but she was already strangely calm. Even with one of the guards standing right next to her, on the other side of the door, close enough to touch, so close that his metal rod was within Kavitha's arm's reach.

When she looked again at the boy, he was looking straight back at her. This time, she slowly came to understand that he was trying to tell her something. But what? Kavitha watched him. And as she did the boy raised his right index finger to his right ear and tapped it. She stared at him. Why was he tapping his ear? Did it hurt? She turned to Vinod but his attention was fixed on Ahmed. When Kavitha spun back, the boy was pointing towards the guard, the one who was standing by the door. What could he mean? She guessed now that he wanted her to listen, but to what? The guard was silent, unmoving. The only other sound was an occasional scream from another bogie, loud enough to travel through the train. There must be other men, in other parts of the train. She had assumed it: these four could not possibly subdue a whole train. But why would he want her to listen to *that*? She strained her ears some more. There were a few night sounds that reached her, an owl, perhaps, or a bulbul, but those were infrequent and could hardly be the reason for the boy's signaling. She knew he wasn't deaf or mute because she'd seen the boy and his father conversing earlier. So what was it?

Then there was a lull. A quiet. For a few seconds, a few precious seconds, there was no screaming, no wailing, Ahmed was busy looking through a bag, and even the old couple and the daughter-in-law were restrained, stoic as they gathered their remaining tattered bags. And that was when she heard it. Footsteps. At first, they meant nothing to her. She looked at the boy,

perplexed. He had heard them too, and she knew because he nodded. *They* were what he had wanted her to hear. But why? Kavitha concentrated. Footsteps. She heard them approaching, growing louder. And louder. And then, just as the footsteps passed the guard in front of their door, she arched her neck and saw that it was one of the guards who had come with Ahmed. So he was patrolling the bogie. She had assumed all three guards were standing outside their door, but now it made sense that one of them would have to patrol the passengers in the other berths.

She sat back and looked at the boy. She hardly had a chance to blink when, in the next instant, the other guard passed the one at the door, *going the other way*. She nearly gasped. *Two* of the guards were patrolling. And not only that, since theirs was the last berth in their bogie, one of the guards, at any given time, was probably in the next bogie over. He wasn't even *in* their bogie, let alone anywhere near their berth.

She had thought there were three men outside the door. But there was only one.

Kavitha had no idea what any of this meant, but she knew it meant something. She nearly reached out and hugged the boy. And he seemed to know it because he smiled.

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Kavitha sat back. She held her breath. She knew there was not much time. Ahmed had already moved on to searching the bags of the younger sister and her mother. She mapped out the layout of their bogie in her head. There were eight berths, exactly like theirs, behind them. Those berths were being patrolled just as theirs was, except Ahmed had already looted the other eight berths. In front were the two doors, facing each other, that led on and off the train. Past the doors were the lavatory and the sink. And against this sink the brother still slumped. He seemed conscious, but barely. Between the lavatory and the sink area was a narrow passageway that led to the next bogie. She knew all their hope was in front, where the doors were, but that was all she knew.

She thought about the layout, and she despaired. There was no way out, not with a guard standing by the door, and two more approaching or within earshot. It would have to be lightning quick, before the two patrol guards could be alerted, but even then . . .

She looked at Vinod. It was growing dark outside, and all the lights in the train had been extinguished, but she could still see his face, wary of Ahmed's movements, watching him as he unpacked the suitcases of the mother and her daughter. Vinod's body was as it had always been, since the day they'd married, slim, straight-backed, the recent gray at his temples only accentuating his seriousness, his reserve. She wanted, for the first time in the ten years she'd known him, to collapse into his arms. She wanted to weep. She wanted to say, There has to be a way out. How are you holding up? he whispered. Instead of answering she rested her forehead against his upper arm and felt the knobiness of his shoulder bone, its hardness against the hardness of her forehead; she felt in that moment that the answer must lie in the body, in its unquenchable will to live. Her gaze fell on the little boy's feet; they dangled off the floor of the train and his shoes hung loose around them, a size too big. The end of the piece of twine he'd put in them was visible, near his left ankle. She looked at the piece of twine and then she lifted her head.

The boy still seemed as though he was listening to the footsteps, and when he noticed her gaze, Kavitha pointed at his shoes and gestured for him to pass her their contents. The boy waited for Ahmed to turn away, just as Kavitha had hoped he would, and quickly handed her the two thin, flat pebbles and the piece of twine. There had been a chit of paper, she recalled, but this he kept for himself. Again, nothing was quite clear in her mind, but never had two rocks and a piece of twine seemed to hold so much promise. The contents of her shoes—a necklace, some rings, and a set of matching bracelets—held none.

Kavitha waited. She didn't know what she was waiting for, but she knew she had to wait.

Ahmed, in the meantime, had found the jewelry in the shoes of the young woman. Kavitha became aware of it only when he laughed out loud and said, So *that's* where they are. He turned to face the rest of the berth. Everybody, he said, swinging his machete, his voice rising at their collusion, Take them off.

Kavitha slowly undid the buckles of her sandals; all this time, the hem of her sari had covered them. Her necklace fell out first. Ahmed picked it up with his machete. It dangled off the tip like a lizard, like something writhing, and not meant to be touched. He added it to the pile of jewelry on the bench. Just as he turned back

towards her, the old man, standing in the corner by the window, clutched at his chest. He let out a long groan and collapsed onto the seat. His daughter-in-law shrieked. His wife was bent over him, pleading, *Kya bhath hey?* What's wrong? Air, someone said, give him air. Ahmed's face bristled. The daughter-in-law rose to take the old man outside, but Ahmed pushed her down. Stay where you are, he seethed. He needs air, she pleaded, he might die. You all might, Ahmed said. He summoned the guard posted at the door. Get the old man some air, he said, and stand where I can see you. The guard stepped into the berth and led the old man to the door. They stood just outside, in the passageway.

Kavitha counted to ten in her head. One of the guards went by. Then the other.

I need to use the lavatory, she said.

The others were busy emptying their shoes. Ahmed took no notice of her.

I said I have to use the lavatory.

Shut up.

It's female trouble, she said.

Vinod gave her a sharp look. Ahmed paused. Leave your shoes here, he said, the pile of jewelry rising behind him like a hill of sand.

The boy looked at Kavitha. She looked back at him.

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The brother, the one slumped by the sink, lifted his eyes when she came out of the berth. The bleeding had slowed, it seemed to her, but he was clearly weak. He had gone pale; his clothes and skin were soaked with blood. For a fleeting moment, she thought she might help him, perhaps even by simply lifting him to a sitting position, but she knew there was no room for that. No time. She passed the old man, the guard, both at the window facing the berth, and when she reached the brother, she knelt swiftly next to his ear, shoved one of the pebbles into his hand (his left; the good one) and whispered, Throw it. Throw it the moment I come out of the lavatory.

She jumped up and ducked inside. Had he heard? Was he even conscious? She listened for the footsteps of the guards. She could no longer hear them, not with the door closed, only when

they were just outside the lavatory door would she be able to hear. Breathe, she told herself, taking a breath. Breathe again, she said. And she did this over and over and over again, thinking only of the little boy.

The lavatory had no window. Just a squat toilet, a tap for water, and a handle for grip. The hole was open and showed the gravel on the tracks. She looked through the hole, lined with excrement, and saw the gravel. Every stone the same color, quarried in some distant place, and varying only slightly in shape. The years following the stillbirth had been like that. She had often wondered, during those years, whether she should have named the baby. She decided it was better that she hadn't. Not because she would have felt a greater loss—there was not, she knew, a loss any greater—but because naming the child, a girl they had told her, would have been an act of bravery, and she didn't want to be brave. She wanted all the fears and weakness of a dark, unnamed place. And she wanted to love the child in that way, without hope and without a name.

When both guards had passed and been gone a few seconds, she opened the lavatory door. At the sound of the door, the brother seemed to wake as if from a deep sleep. He looked at the pebble, a little too long, a little too long, Kavitha fretted, then flung it down the corridor. Ahmed yelled, What was that? The guard, the one by the old man, took a few tentative steps past the berth.

This was the moment. This was it.

Kavitha darted past the brother, reached in and grabbed the little boy's hand. They jumped from the train, through the door near the lavatory, and as soon as they hit the ground, Kavitha handed the little boy one end of the twine, shoved him against the door, and said, Hold it. Tight. She held the other end, on the other side of the door. Ahmed came racing out, they held on until he tripped, and leapt out of the way so they wouldn't break his fall. Then they ran.

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It was dark. There were a few stars, not many. The sliver of moon cast hardly any light. They scurried under the bogie, up a few cars, towards the engine, and lay on the couplings, face down, their arms wrapped tight around them. Neither spoke. Kavitha

waited until the guards had run past, checking under the bogies and inside them, then indicated the ladder that led to the roof of the train. They climbed up—the rungs digging into Kavitha's bare feet—and crawled to the middle, if for no other reason than to be at the halfway point in case they had to run in either direction. It was from this vantage point that Kavitha saw a road in the distance, a full kilometer away, at least; a thin, dark ribbon that she assumed was a road. But it was empty, not a car or a lorry or a bullock cart passed.

The night deepened.

She could not have said how much time had gone by when she saw a small light in the distance, almost a puncture in the night sky. It grew—slowly, because it was so far away. There, she whispered, look. The boy raised his head. What do we do, he said. They waited. The light got bigger. Alarmingly fast. She knew there was no way for either of them to reach the road before the light passed them. She studied the ground. Near the train was a small tree. Further along was what looked to be a pile of luggage.

She handed the boy the second pebble.

She saw, after a time, his small, murky shape moving to the tree. Then the luggage. He had told her, before he'd descended the ladder, that he'd aimed pebbles at moving trains lots of times, in his village. I never missed, he boasted. Kavitha didn't point out to him that the moving light was not a train, but something much smaller. She didn't tell him, but it's dark. And she didn't say, we only get to play this game once.

She heard a clink. Didn't she? What else could it be? There was nothing for many, many kilometers surrounding the train. That was of course why Ahmed and his men had picked this spot. And that's what she had thought while traveling on the train: that to journey through such emptiness was to invite it inside.

The light stopped.

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The driver of the lorry, a burly Sikh who spoke very little, except to say, I'm going to Attari, no farther, ignored Kavitha. But we have to get the police, she said, the authorities, the military, I don't know. That train is under siege, she cried. My husband is on it, his father. People are hurt. The cabin of the lorry was dark.

She turned from the driver to the boy. He was staring out of the window. He wasn't my father, the boy said, falling silent again.

Kavitha looked at him, as if for the first time. What's your name? she asked.

Mustafa.

A Muslim. But why was he going to India? They drove on and on, eastward.

You didn't miss, she said to Mustafa. Then she said, Was that luggage?

No.

What was it?

Kerosene, he said.

And she, too, fell silent.

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They reached Attari late the next morning. She'd learned from Mustafa that the man she'd taken to be his father was a Hindu friend of his parents', entrusted to take their son to relatives living in East Pakistan. But where are your parents? she'd asked. He'd looked away, and said nothing. After a moment he'd turned to her and said, My cousins are waiting.

She knew she would take him there. He refused to take another train, and she was not keen on it either, so they traveled slowly, overland by road. Mostly lorries and bullock carts, a passing car if they were fortunate. She had silver anklets she'd pushed up her calves, so that Ahmed wouldn't see, and she traded these for money. It ran out well before they got to East Pakistan. In the presence of other people, the two were often silent, letting them assume they were mother and son. That seemed easiest.

Sitting for these long stretches of quiet, Kavitha was surprised by how often she thought of Vinod. She knew he was gone, that she was now a widow. The awareness was not startling. Not even frightening. I was widowed long ago, she thought. And she knew that on the train, when she'd laid her head on his shoulder, and had felt the roundness and knobiness of a bone so funny, so irreverent, so unlike him, she had said her goodbye.

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They were on a horse cart, nearing East Pakistan. Maybe a day, no more. It was late afternoon. It was a covered, two-wheeled cart and Kavitha lay in its shade, dozing. Mustafa lay beside her. The motion of the cart woke her (or was it a dream?) and she said to Mustafa, What happened to us, it's ours. Yours and mine. Don't speak of it.

And in his half-sleep, perhaps also dreaming, Mustafa heard, You are mine. Don't speak. And so he never did.



Steve Lautermilch, photograph