



THE JCB PRIZE FOR  
LITERATURE  
— 2021 —

Longlist



NAME

PLACE

AWARD

THING

Daribha Lyndem

# Name Place Animal Thing

by Daribha Lyndem



*THE* JCB PRIZE *FOR*  
**LITERATURE**  
—2021—

An exclusive extract from the  
JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS

# Bahadur

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We lived in a house at the bottom of a hill. We took it on rent from Mrs Guha, the lady who lived in the much larger house at the top of the hill. Hers was a lovely Assam type house that was in several stages of dilapidation, but not so ramshackle that it could not be called quaint. Every time I would go with my father to pay the monthly rent, I would try to peek inside Mrs Guha's house from the front door. 'Stay out here,' my father would warn me as I walked in with him, hoping to get a glimpse of her living room. From the outside, as I stood on my toes, craning my neck, I could see wooden ceilings and floors, as well as a large glass cabinet that housed bric-a-brac which had managed to escape the film of dust that rested gravely on all the books that lay on top of the cabinet. Inside were souvenirs from faraway places and old framed photos of a bygone time. I imagined her travelling to Morocco or Chile, haggling with a street vendor, buying these things; artefacts that were a testimony



to a well-travelled life. Proof of travel is as important, if not more important than the actual journey.

My mother, father, younger sister and I lived in that small rented house till I was eight. It was located in Nongrim Hills, a quiet neighbourhood which was at the time considered well removed from the city centre. The doors were so low that my giant of a father would have to stoop every time he got in. He would only be able to stand straight once he was inside. There was a living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen that only one person could stand in at a time, and one bathroom. The living room was a soothing yellow which was juxtaposed against the riot of colour my mother had adorned the walls with. We had small pieces of furniture placed strategically so no one would bump into them. There were wall hangings made of red fabric, studded with small glass mirrors, that my mother got in Gujarat. Near the entrance, she hung decorative cloth parrots on a string. In a small corner of the room, there stood a large peacock wicker chair, on which she had placed a colourful woollen crochet blanket. We always took our family photographs around it. Nothing in the room matched anything else, which is how my mother liked it. My sister and I never thought the house was small because we never knew anything else.

It was when we were living in this house that I met Bahadur and his family. My earliest memory of Bahadur was of him answering Mrs Guha's summons. I saw this the first day when my father went over to sign the lease. I waited in the garden and picked at ants with a stick as they completed the formalities inside. When they were done and my father was sipping the last dregs from the tea cup, she walked to the balcony and shouted out:



‘Bahadur! Bahadur! Where are you? Come quickly, it’s time to go to Iewduh.’

‘Yes! Yes! I’m coming,’ Bahadur replied from a distance, breathing heavily as he ran up the slope in his worn out sandals. I saw him knock his heels against each other like a tap dancer once inside the car, loosening the dry mud that stuck to the soles. He then parked outside the house and waited to take Mrs Guha to the market. It was an old grey Ambassador that seemed to lumber on like an aging rhino let out to graze.

‘I don’t like how you make me wait,’ Mrs Guha said as she fussed over her shawl and got into the car. He kept quiet, smiled and nodded. He knew saying anything would only anger the old lady.

Mrs Guha only left the house on Saturdays when she had to go to the Iew to buy supplies, and she only went with Bahadur. There was no one else who would go with her. She lived alone. She used to live with her husband until he took his place among the bric-a-brac in a small Chinese urn that rested quietly in the back of her glass cabinet. She had two daughters; one was married, staying elsewhere, and the other was studying abroad. She only had a cleaning lady and a cook who would come over in the mornings.

It struck me as odd that such a little old lady could stay all alone in this big, quiet house. The only noise in the house would come from the creaking of the wooden floors, which seemed to begin their own private conversation anytime they were disturbed, annoyed perhaps at being woken. Mrs Guha always threw parties where other old biddies would come over to play bingo, sitting around the fireplace with brandy. She was a jolly sort when she was in this state, and one could forget that in the mornings she was a stodgy old lady who did not like it when the rent was not paid on time.



‘I don’t like to wait for the rent, you know. My husband would manage things when he was alive, but I’m too old to be coming and knocking at your door,’ she would tell my father; and he, on cue, would smile and nod. She would continue, ‘If my daughters were here I would have had some help. But they need to leave their home because they have to take care of their husbands’.

Again we would nod and look sympathetic. ‘You’re doing a great job on your own,’ my father always replied. It was as if she waited for him to say this every time, like a petulant toddler waiting to be consoled. The refrain managed to gratify her, although she made a show of pretending she was already well-aware of what he was telling her. She would wave her hand as if to brush off the compliment but would stop grumbling at us. My father always winked at me as soon as we left, as if to let me in on the trick. When I grew older I used it on my own grandmother.

Mrs Guha owned much of the land on the hill and it was all looked after by Bahadur. It was a large wooded area that was interspersed with houses. The Mohantys and the Kharsyntiews lived in houses adjacent to us. The Lyngwas and the Hazarikas lived opposite us. There were two large gates, one on the east side and one on the west, and a driveway that went all the way down to our house. Small homes lined the side of this road, and although their construction was never really planned, their even placement side by side was quite fortuitous. The area was so large that there were swathes of land that remained barren. Mrs Guha could not afford to build more houses there, but she was loath to sell the land that had been in her family since before Meghalaya seceded from Assam.

Bahadur worked as the guard, gardener, driver and



caretaker all rolled into one. The place would be in shambles if not for him. He made life more comfortable for everyone around him. I heard the residents complain and call to him for numerous reasons: ‘Bahadur, my pump;’ ‘Bahadur there are rats in the house;’ ‘Bahadur can you paint my windows?’ Everyone went to him. Sometimes when they were happy with his work they would treat him to a beer or give him bakshish, or ‘boxes’ as my grandmother called it. Each morning as I was on my way to school, I would see Bahadur sweep leaves and dust with his rake-like bamboo broom in the Mohanty’s perpetually overgrown lawn. Through the cloud of dust I would shout, out ‘Bye Bahadur!’ waving my hand frantically so he would see me. In the evenings he washed Mrs Kharsyntiew’s car and watered Mrs Lyngwa’s plants. I would see him stick one end of a water hose into a little tap that was fixed to a wall near Mrs Kharsyntiew’s house, from which spring water trickled through. Sometimes I ran back home from school so I could help him water the plants, although my spindly arms could barely hold the watering can.

Whenever I saw Bahadur, he was always busy. It was only in the evenings that he could spend time with his family, but he never missed a meal with them. He and his family lived in a shanty behind the house we stayed in. It had one big room in which they all slept, ate and entertained guests. Next to this room was a tiny kitchen. Outside their house was a place where they could bathe and wash clothes in the open. Twenty paces away from this spot was an outdoor toilet. It seemed to me that they had been living there for a long time.

I once asked my mother, ‘Why is Bahadur’s Khasi so strange? He cannot say “doh” Mom, he says “du-oh.”’

‘He’s not Khasi, that is why he cannot pronounce it like we do. It’s a third language to him. He’s Nepali.’



It was only after my mother said this that I began to notice other dissimilarities between us. Bahadur did not look like us or speak like us, but I never thought he was very different. His rice pudding was as good as the one my mother made, and he liked watching movies just as we did.

Bahadur was slight in stature and looked as though he had spent too much time in the sun. His eyes crinkled when he smiled. Crusty bits of paint stuck to his trousers and a woollen cap always sat snugly on his head no matter the season. Once, I saw him carry a Syntex tank all by himself, and I was surprised he was so strong for such a small man. I think he was forty then, and he had been working there since he was a child. His father, before him, worked for the late Mr Guha, Mrs Guha's father-in-law.

Bahadur and his wife had five children: four daughters and one son. At the time I started to become friends with them, the eldest was Suman at sixteen, there was Rupa who was thirteen, Jyoti was eleven, Ashwini was nine, and Ajay was seven, the same age as I was then. They were my closest friends in the early days of my childhood, before I met Yuva, who would later become my closest friend. Bahadur made it a point to send all of his kids to school. Every morning before the sun rose, he went out to the colony where the milkmen stayed to buy milk for his family. His wife woke him up and handed him two canisters and a fine piece of muslin to strain the milk. He always bought more than was needed so his children could drink their fill before they went off to school. 'Don't spoil them so much,' his wife would tell him every so often, but I think she was secretly happy that he went out of his way to care for them.

My father and Bahadur got along very well. He called my father 'Bajrang' because he had heard some of the



neighbours calling him 'Bah Jrong'. 'Bah Jrong' was a nickname our neighbours gave my father which loosely translates to 'Mr Tall'. My father, a Catholic, found Bahadur's name for him humorously ironic, so he never bothered to correct him. Bahadur would sometimes accompany my father whenever he had business outside town. He would take the wheel when my father got weary. Bahadur enjoyed the excursions, and my father was glad for the rest his company accorded him on the long drive home.

One time, I was allowed to go along with them. On the journey back I heard Bahadur telling my father about his problems:

'Madam does not pay me very well, but at least I get that shanty free of rent,' he said to my father.

'You could try asking her for more money,' my father suggested.

'No, no she will get angry. Right now my family has a roof over their heads and that is important. Why should I anger the old lady. She said she would look after my family. She promised me. Especially for Suman.'

'How? How will she help her?'

'Her daughter in foreign, she needs someone who will take care of the baby.'

'What baby? Her daughter just got married and is still studying.'

'Oh when she has it. She told me this. Suman is getting older, and I don't know if I can afford a wedding. Madam promised she would take care of her.'

'Hmm, don't put too much hope in this plan,' my father warned him. Bahadur nodded and took over the wheel.

Every evening after I had finished my lessons, I would go outside Bahadur's house and call out to my friends to



come and play. At sunset the earth still smelled of fresh wet soil as a result of the rains. It always rained. The flying termites would crowd around the porch lights after the rains, looking as if they were drying themselves by the warm yellow glow of the bulb. They came out in swarms after the rains, an exodus, looking to start their colonies elsewhere, many losing their wings, crawling frantically on the ground, away from the curious sniffs of the cat who prowled around. As I waited for my friends at dusk, shouting their names—‘Suman! Rupa! Ajay!’—I would swat away the hapless flying termites that would land on my shirt. Those nights were cool, the wind blowing against my skin making all my hair stand on end, reminding me of how a dead chicken’s skin would look after Bahadur had plucked all its feathers out in the backyard, before it was to be cooked. The day preceding these nights would get very sultry, and the clouds would look grey and bloated. When they were ready, they burst out, a hard thundering rain, splattering the hills, washing away the dust. It looked like the hills had just been given a fresh coat of green paint. The streets would get muddy, and the asphalt road would be riddled with circular rainbow patterns from the rain mingling with the oil that dripped from cars. Outside our house the unpaved ground oozed with sludge. I would stand there and wait, my rubber slippers sinking into the squelchy mud, the wet grass coming up to my ankles and the flying termites coming in between my eyes and my spectacles. After a while I would see my friends all come out and wave. We would play hide and seek in the grassy wooded area behind our houses until it was too dark to see, and I could hear my mother calling out for me, ‘Da! Da! Come back home! It’s time for dinner!’



I often went to Bahadur's home on the weekends. Even though I had already had lunch in my own home, I had a second one with them. They nearly always ate the same thing: dal, rice and a single fresh onion that stung each time you bit into its purple, crunchy flesh. We would all sit on the floor in a circle. 'This is like a picnic,' I told them once, to which they just shrugged and smiled. 'Bam, bam,' Bahadur's wife would coax me into eating before the dal got too cold.

I don't remember enjoying any meal as much as I did the ones I had was sitting on the floor of that one room house, where I did not have to worry about spilling on the carpet or talking too loudly. I could just sit and joke with Bahadur's children, as we took turns biting into the fleshy large onion we all shared. He always apologized that he had nothing more to offer. 'Don't mind beta, it is only this. No meat. Hope that is fine.'

'Yes! I love onions! Also, Mom always makes the dal too thick,' I would say.

'This house is not fit for entertaining guests,' he would continue, and I would reassure him that I did not mind. I knew it was smaller than my house, and that gave me a sense that there was a hierarchy in the world.

Sometimes on warm, dry nights, my mother would open the doors of the room we kept our television in and play an old Bollywood film. Both the doors were opened outward, and the television was brought forward to the front door so that everyone could see. My friends and I would sit on the stairs in front of the house, shaded by a giant Weeping willow, its leaves drooping down, almost tickling us. Next to it stood the tall symmetrical cryptomeria tree. It was tall and sturdy, its leaves imbued with a fresh woody smell, and I always took a big whiff whenever I crossed it. It was not a



tree that was native to the region; I was told it was brought by the British a long time ago and planted here. So on the stairs, under the weeping willow, and the cryptomeria, we sat in the evenings watching an old film as the crickets whittled their feet and the trees rustled. We sat enthralled as we watched *Khoon Bhari Maang* or *E.T.* rooting for the heroes, gasping at every turn. Sometimes a caterpillar would fall off the tree onto our necks, causing a breakout of red rashes. Suman always used her long hair to try and rub off the caterpillar's hair that stuck to our skin. 'Here take one end of my hair,' she offered.

'I think I should just ask mom to pull out these things with tweezers,' I said pointing to the little spiky hairs on my skin.

'No this will work. I always do this and it removes all of them,' she insisted. It worked most of the time.

End of school term holidays were for playing and 'gallivanting' as my mother chided when she was in bad spirits. We played in the meadow behind our homes. I was not sure if it was part of the property. There was a barbed wire fence that ran along the periphery of the meadow. It was all warped and bent wide enough for a person to go through. We squeezed ourselves through these openings. In this meadow, men lay on the grass shirtless, sunning themselves as their goats grazed. On bright mornings we could get a clear view of the meadow from the steep slope that lay on one side of the west gate. This gate opened to a part of the property that had fewer houses. We would go there to play because we knew we would not be bothered by adults. The ground was its most dry in the winters, and we took advantage of this. We all carried our pieces of cardboard to this slope and pretended these pieces were toboggans,



climbed to the top and came sliding down. Someone always ended up tearing their trousers.

Bahadur left soon after I turned eight. I had heard him tell my father that he missed being back in Nepal, and that he longed to see his mother before she died. His longing for his village was further exacerbated by what happened to his son about a month after my birthday.

I did not know everything that transpired that day. I only caught glimpses of what had happened in the morning by peeking out onto the street through the lace curtains that hung against the window. The rest I learnt by overhearing snippets of conversations between my parents.

Like any regular day, my mother and father woke up at five in the morning for a steaming cup of tea. On most days my mother would be very loud when she busied herself in the kitchen, and I would wake up to the sound of the kettle being put on the stove noisily. With nothing but the sound of birds chirping and the milkmen dropping off canisters outside doors, they sipped tea and calmly discussed the things that needed to be done that day. On this morning as they continued their conversation, the quiet was pierced by ghastly cries for help. My parents ignored them at first until the sounds grew louder and louder. The cries sounded like they were coming from a wounded animal. My father came into the room we were sleeping in to peek outside, trying to detect the source of the sound. His presence woke me up, and I sat upright on my bed to also look outside my window. I heard my father exclaim ‘My god’; he rushed out to call my mother and tell her what he had seen. She told him, ‘Hurry up! Get dressed and go help him!’

The urgency in their voices scared me and I tried harder to get a look at what they had seen. My father put on his



shoes and some warm clothes and ran out. That is when I saw him, it was Ajay, and he seemed to be covered in blood. He could not even stand. I saw my father run toward him, trying to hold him steady. My father shouted to a man that happened to pass by, calling to him for assistance. I could see him gesturing, asking the man to stand with the boy as my father went to look for Bahadur. He was not around, and it was only his wife who was home. Bahadur had gone to get milk. The family ran back to where Ajay was; he seemed in a worse condition than when my father had left him in. On seeing him bloodied and moaning, his mother was beside herself with shock and needed to be consoled. His legs and his hands bore wounds and he bled onto the asphalt road.

On hearing the noise, other neighbours came to their windows to ascertain what had happened but, as I watched, they did nothing to help. Mrs Kharsyntiew, who lived with her three sons, peeked through the window while all this transpired. I saw the ruffle of the lace curtain being pulled back abruptly by someone in that house. They did not bother to come out.

I saw my father go towards Mr Mohanty's house and ring the bell. He shouted, 'Can Mr Mohanty come and help please? I cannot lift the boy alone, and I don't have a car.'

Mrs Mohanty opened the door and replied abruptly 'He is sleeping.' She shut the door just as abruptly.

The Purkhayastas and the Lyngwas also watched from their windows. I saw my father try to wave at them when he could see movement at the windows, but no one responded to him or came outside. The passer by who had been standing with Ajay and the family then offered his help. He and my father bent down to try to pick Ajay up without causing him any pain. We did not own a car so they had to carry Ajay all



the way out to the main road to hail a taxicab. None of the neighbours had offered their vehicles. There was a deathly silence on our hill except for the loud wails of Ajay.

I did not see my father for a few hours. When he got back we were all sitting in the kitchen. He came and slumped into a chair. He looked exhausted. My mother made him some tea and after he had taken a few sips he proceeded to tell my mother what had happened. ‘That boy was mauled by dogs. He was throwing stones at them trying to get their attention, but he angered them instead. Must have been around fifteen dogs. They all bit him pretty badly. Bahadur came there as soon as he got word.’

My father took another sip of his tea and shook his head. ‘No one came to help that boy. Neither Mohanty’s son came to help nor any of Kong Kharsyntiew’s three boys. They all just watched from their windows. They could have offered to come with us. What is the world coming to if neighbours won’t even show a shred of decency and help out a young boy?’

‘What about Ajay?’ My mother asked, looking worried.

‘He’ll need stitches and shots. He was badly bitten. He can barely stand. Bahadur was panic-stricken when he got to the hospital, he did not know what to do. It was a good thing we were there.’

‘I can only imagine. At least that other chap was there. Who was he?’

‘I don’t know who he was,’ my father replied, looking perplexed. ‘He happened to be taking a walk in the area. Decent fellow. I don’t know how I would have managed without his help. Tariang his name was. Stays in Jaiaw. I was surprised when he told me he was from there.’

‘What was he doing so far off from there?’



‘Some football training or some such. Didn’t ask him too many questions.’

‘Surprising to see a Jaiaw boy help out a dkhar,’ my mother remarked, almost chuckling as she mentioned a part of Shillong that was only inhabited by Khasis, ‘Bloody Mohantys didn’t come out to help. They were the closest to him’

‘Most people see Bahadur as the help, and they don’t want to lift a finger for them.’ My mother looked sombre.

‘Dkhar’ was a word I learnt when I was young. I did not understand it’s full meaning until I was much older. It refers to people like Bahadur and Yuva, people who were not like me, who were not tribal. I understood it to mean people who were not from this land. It was a strange, loaded word meaning different things to different people. Words like dkhar can be innocuous or they can be weaponized. It made me think of people in terms of them and us. Although I was not taught it as an insult, I always saw it used as one.

We finished our breakfast, and I was told to go to my room. My parents continued with the discussion once I was gone and all I could hear was steady mumbling. I felt terrible for Bahadur and his family. I prayed for Ajay to get better. In our room my sister sat with her toys oblivious to what had happened, too young to understand. I tried to ask my father some questions that evening, ‘How many stitches did Ajay have to get, Papa? Is he going to be fine? Why didn’t anyone else help him?’ My parents reassured me that Ajay was fine and changed the topic. I knew enough not to ask any of my friends, and I was told to let them have their privacy. I felt alone and confused because I had no one to talk to and I worried about them.

In the weeks that followed this incident I rarely saw my friends. They had to help around the house because



Bahadur and his wife were too busy taking care of Ajay. Mrs Guha, although sympathetic, did nothing to help. The neighbours neither asked Bahadur about Ajay, nor offered any assistance.

With time, Bahadur grew jaded. I never saw him help any of the other neighbours anymore, or sit with any of Mrs Kharsyntiew's boys on warm winter mornings, cleaning their lawn and drinking beer as he used to. He spoke very little and only went out with Mrs Guha when she had to go shopping. Lunches in his home were no longer how they used to be. He looked quiet and pensive, and barely responded to what his children were saying. He would only nod when we all sat down for our meals, smiling at me weakly when I left and waved goodbye.

When Ajay was fully recovered, Bahadur felt like he could no longer work there. He came over one evening to speak to my parents and told them how he was grateful for all their help and that he would soon be leaving. 'I miss my family in Kathmandu. All my brothers are there,' he said to them.

'But what will you do there?' My mother asked

'My cousin brother owns and runs a garage there. I can learn about cars. He will teach me.'

My parents tried to convince him to stay, but Bahadur was adamant.

Before they left, I met my friends for one last night when we sat to watch a Bollywood film on the steps. We picked *Khiladi*. It was a chilly night and there were no caterpillars then. The stairs felt cold underneath us, and we all had our own shawls. That night Bahadur and his wife joined us as well. My mother made tomato soup with croutons that floated at the top—my favourite. We all sat there drinking



soup out of small cups, watching the film and enjoying their last night at Mrs Guha's.

Long after we moved away from Mrs Guha's, I heard that she had relocated to Wisconsin in the United States to live with her daughter. She had sold the property and most of her things, except for the photographs that hung on the wall, the items in the glass shelves, and the Chinese urn that housed the remains of her husband. She carried those wherever she went. I never found out who bought the property. I often crossed it on my way to college, and from the rusted gated where the green paint was chipping off, I could only see tombstones. I heard that the land had been turned into a graveyard. There were no longer any signs of the house we stayed in, no doorway with its low entrance, no weeping willow or cryptomeria tree from which the caterpillars fell. The ramshackle cottage that housed my earliest friends and shaped my memories lay bare and forgotten. Only the flying termites remained, fluttering below the street lights outside the property. They came out of their hidey holes in the ground after it rained, their thick bodies carried by shiny papery wings, lured by any source of light, hypnotized—until they collapsed and died on the soggy yellow leaves and soft red earth below.



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