

# Frank

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THE WRITERS  
ENFIN!



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*Nine poets including Duo Duo Interview and Bei Dao...*

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Parul Kapur

# *Blind Elephants*

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**S**lowly we circled the islands east of Blido, part of Stockholm's archipelago, twenty thousand skerries stippling the blue-lit Baltic from Arholma to Landsort. He stood up in the canoe while I paddled, swinging his hips to an Indian tune he whistled, pursing his lips in a lovelorn look that made me laugh. He sang and splashed and played the boy but it didn't embarrass me in our privacy, our void of northern sea and air. When he murmured sentimentally about the beauty of the gulls and pinescrubbed shores I could only smile with old affection. God seems to be talking to us through this perfect blue sky, he whispered, and I smiled again. Later we camped on a beach for the night and he joined a party of Swedish teenagers, drunk and half his age. He danced in a circle with them around a low fire. I went off alone down the pebbled shore, without a torchlight, holding my long Oriental hair in a loose knot in my palm. The moon lit my hand up like a silver plate. I raged against him, his silly boyishness, and was overcome by a longing for my husband, whom I imagined coming for me in a ship across the flat black sea.

You're getting fat, I told him the next day as we canoed to another island, trailing a pair of orange boats manned by young Swedes. All my wife's fault, he shrugged, she feeds me too well. Turn your head this way for a moment, I said. I pushed my thumb into a baldspot in the center of his scalp. And old too, I remarked, so much older in just ten years. I couldn't suppress the bitterness in my voice; it was as if I hated him. I scrubbed his graying beard with my fingertips. I was silent for a long time after that, almost as an apology, feeling my love for him return as I watched his muscled arms pull the oars. I wanted to kiss those arms but I held myself back. And soon, perhaps because I'd restrained myself, my temper rose again. I want to see something! I demanded.

See what? He swept his arm across the view of sapphire sea and distant brown islands. Isn't this enough for you? It's gorgeous.

I didn't know what I wanted to confront except that suddenly I had a desire for some monumental image—a black tidal wave or a stone mountain thrusting up or the sea freezing in a glacier—something larger than this placid beauty. A vision that would transform us. We were very close now to the orange canoes full of Swedes. I didn't come here to see tourists, I snapped, city people flocking to their boats and holiday homes. I thought the Baltic was thrashing waves and electric storms, desolate as you imagine northern countries—as their religion seems to be.

He winced as if I'd hit him. Don't you want to be happy? he asked. I felt compelled then to tell him of an overnight boat trip my husband had once taken from Stockholm to Helsinki. Fifty foot waves had crashed over the deck and some passengers had remained awake the whole night,



though my husband, who always stayed calm and sensible, had slept soundly. My husband is more admirable than I usually acknowledge, I said.

Two years later, just as I'd finished a series of articles on anti-nuclear movements in England (my husband had taken the photographs), he called to say hello, I'm in Rio. He was working on a deal to export leather jackets there. I'll join you, I blurted. We started laughing at the idea, our voices crackling over oceans, but I was restless and longing to see him again. A week later we were lounging on the pale sands of Impanema, dancing till four in the morning, lighting candles in churches where women came to worship in sequined swimsuits and sandal feet. When a pretty girl walked by, he whistled just to embarrass me. He told me he'd set up a leather goods factory outside of Bombay with the money he'd made from his spice and cashew trade with East Africa and Europe. You Indian merchants are sharp, I said, and you haven't gone out of business in a thousand years, it's still cardamom and cloves for you. I told him about Greenham Common and other peace movements I'd written on in England, I said I might profile Petra Kelly and the Greens in West Germany next. What we need is peace on earth, I jabbed him in the shoulder, you remember that idea from our university days, don't you? He gazed dreamily at the white sky. I cupped my hand around his ear and bellowed: cap-i-tal is the root of all evil. He grabbed my wrist. Look at how gently the palms sway in the breeze, he murmured. I love talking to you like this—his eyes softened like a child's—forgetting the world, it helps me keep my sanity. But it's the world we're discussing, I scowled, there's no forgetting it. What about your wife's telegrams and phonecalls tracking us everywhere? As if we were doing something wrong.

I swung my arm through his in the evening as we walked back to the hotel and later, at night, we made love as we sometimes did, though we had an understanding that we shouldn't, out of loyalty to our spouses.

I grew remorseful as I slept, and in the early morning I shook him awake. We shouldn't have, I said. If I could describe this to my husband without shame or fear then I could do it but I can't speak of it—

Leave your husband, he mumbled. He pushed his broad sweaty face into the pillow and pulled the sheet over his head. I began to scratch my head viciously. I keep betraying him, I cried. I kicked the sheets off, got up and paced the balcony, searching for *something* on the vacant horizon until the sun rose from the sea.

Why do we do this to ourselves? he asked when I was back in bed. I rubbed my feet against his. You don't know what you want, he said.

Say what you like, I snapped. I pulled away from him. I didn't say anything more, though, because I thought he might be right. Then it occurred to me that I did know what I wanted: some pieces of my past.



These pieces were the people I had loved. Not many, just a handful; and not all of them lovers. But even a handful was difficult to preserve: people died, fell away, vanished in the distance. We would vanish from each other too, I thought, watching him as he snored open-mouthed, one arm hanging over the edge of the bed. I leaned over to embrace him.

That afternoon I received a letter from London which I clutched like a treasure, reading it over and over again until I was sick of my husband's gentle paternal voice and thoroughly bored by the idea of home. I hope you're enjoying yourself, he wrote, but it's been two weeks, dear. My husband wanted to trust me. He loved me and I assured him there was nothing in these journeys, they were made to keep up an old friendship. If he grumbled and tried to keep me from going, I cried that he didn't own me. This is the age of liberation! We aren't living in a village in the 10th century! I carried on with my rhetoric, always pleading in the end, don't you believe me? There's nothing in this. It's just a little time in the sun. I tore up my husband's letter, irritated by the intrusion; I had no remorse left. Immediately, I went out and booked two plane tickets to Manaus from where we would take a steamboat down the Amazon.

The river wrestled through humid foliage that sometimes closed on us like shadows and sometimes receded into the margins of space, letting the water spread out wide as an ocean. To distract the man-eating piranha fish, the captain explained, some tribes threw in a cow or sheep when they wanted to cross the river. I stood out on deck all day and late into the night, my eyes fixed on the water.

What are you looking for? he joined me now and then, leaving his cardgame or conversation with the other passengers.

The piranha, I said, without taking my eyes off the river or jungle, which I searched for tribesmen bearing a sacrificial animal. Imagine a fish devouring a cow, I said, I want to see that with you. Why? he asked. I didn't reply. I couldn't tell him I wanted to witness a catastrophe, some



devastating phenomenon that would transform our fates—our lives of longing—in an irreversible way.

The only sign I saw of piranha was a little stir in the water when the captain tossed in a thin beefsteak. It disappeared instantly. But I saw no fish, no spectacle of destruction. It's a river like any other, I said contemptuously. There's nothing much to look at, after all.

I didn't want to be with him again—it was too exhausting to hold onto even a fragment of the past, I'd decided. But after enough time had passed, I felt a need to write to him. I want to see the white elephants in Kenya with you, I said, will you take me? Bring your sleeping bag, he replied. Through dim forest thatch and matted vines we climbed the range above Lake Victoria to Mt. Elgon's base. The rockcaves gaped, deep African eyes, their saltrims and saltshelves licked dry by the tongues of a thousand pale blind elephants. A spectacle, our guide confided, only a handful have seen.

We pitched tents in the bush outside the caves. If he talked to me I quieted him with a brusque wave of the hand, my eyes searching the caves' black depths. At night we wore headtorches like miners, the iodine lamps covered with red plastic to soften the glare. I refused to sleep and kept vigil till morning. He said we should have gone to Mombassa instead, laid out on the beach and relaxed. Just imagine taking in the sun and drinking gin and tonics, he smiled at me. Quiet, I said, listening for animals.

We saw nothing for three days, so on the fourth we climbed further, as the guide suggested, to the green bamboo forests where the elephants sometimes wandered. On the way up I stumbled on a web of roots and he held his hand out to save me from falling. I'm with you he assured me. I squeezed his hand, then let go. You're *always* with me, aren't you? I jeered. Exactly how many countries between us if you count eastward from London to Bombay?

He hiked down a muddy trail with the Kikuyu guide while I stayed near the tent in a small clearing in the bamboo. I knew in my heart the elephants would come this way. All day I watched for them through his binoculars and in the red flare of the evening sun they appeared for me in the distance. They grew larger as they approached and suddenly they were in front of me. A thousand white elephants with eyes clenched, thudding and honking as they trampled the bamboo. The ground trembled as if it were cracking and then I saw the brush split and the earth collapse into trenches under their rushing bulk, dust clouding the air brown, their animal trumpets announcing the moment of dissolution when all matter—all bodies—separated, scattered, disintegrated. Everything, even myself, was being pulled apart from what it belonged to and it was blissful, it was what I looked to the horizon for, finally ending.