

# The Shadows of Birds

---

By Scott Provence

## Introduction

There's something that exists in the corners of your eyes. It's blurred, and out of focus, but you know what it is. It's color, a memory of a sight or a smell, it's the play of shape and shadow. You don't need to look at it, you know exactly where it stands in relation to your own life. When I'm talking to someone, I like to watch the way their mouth moves—which vowels and consonants are stretched out enough to reveal a flash of teeth. I love the color of teeth, the infinite palate of color between white and the shadows of white. I watch to see if the person's nose moves when they close their lips. I watch their eyes and can see myself—my own features being let into their world, making room for me. And meanwhile, where we are not watching, the whole of existence swirls around us. Voices rise up and over, conversations eddy in secluded corners. These things are the static in our world, a sensual synthesis. Passing laughter, familiar shapes, a sunlit flash of hair or the dappled pattern of leaves and sky.

There's seldom a need to question the nature of all of this. Shapes and colors of the everyday background do not need to be constantly measured and redefined. And there's more as well. Past memories and relationships do not have to be relived each day, so that we are able to awaken in the morning, confident of who we are. These things are accepted, and dismissed. They are filed away in the endless reserves of information we use to classify reality. I live in a city—the fact that I cannot see the city from my room at night does not negate the streets or the constellation of lights. I have a family—that gives me roots. Sitting around a table with them, I can see the blue eyes of my parents, the

hints of red that run playfully down our genetic brunette line. These things tell me who I am, they create a character for myself and others. I can tell people stories of my physicality. There's a telltale eyebrow in our family, my brother and I inherited it from our grandpa, who couldn't tell a lie without it arching to give him away. There are scars on my body that run like plotlines: introduction, climax, resolution. Here's why I smile crooked, here's why I only speak softly.

Is that enough? There are always attempts being made to step out of the periphery, to solidify, take shape from among the chaotic masses. Perhaps a direct address is the best, so many points of order are lost on an unsympathetic public. Who wants to hear a story about a dog, or a fisherman, or a love-struck teenager. They melt so quickly back into the fiction that exists around us. Or is that reality? The men and women who shuffle around me in the mornings are simply undiscovered characters. Listen: Right now, one of us is undiscovered, the other is making an attempt to bridge the gap. Have faith. It is not a step taken in vain, soon you will see something on the horizon.

"It's right there," I told the two children that held dutifully on to my hands as they stared off into the distance. It was a refreshingly bright, summer day and as we walked through the park, we could still smell the dark scent of last night's rain. The summer downpour that had suddenly occurred the day before only made the world around us more vivid, reviving color that had been baked dry by the sun. As we were walking, I had been looking over the trees that stood out saw-toothed against the skyline. The children were talking softly to each other, shuffling their feet in the wet blades of grass, or pocketing an earthy treasure with their free hand. While I gazed at the gently swaying

trees, I decided the two children (an adoringly fearless girl with close-cropped pigtails and a shy-faced boy who was quick to smile) were going to see something no one had ever seen before. The girl was busy making another chain of daisies, she had crowned herself the queen of a glittering, golden palace. The boy was looking for wood-elves hiding under the leaves. But these were both things that would eventually be forgotten in the years, I wanted to give them something they could always believe in. Hope? Love? What advice on these could I possibly give? When you're trying to create something, you have to start small. I chose a bird.

Do you two see what I see?" I asked them, pointing a finger toward the distant trees, which were flushed with pollen and the blush of surrounding flowers. The children's games were abandoned for a minute, and they became part of my world again. "There's a hummingbird flying by that tree over there" I whispered quietly, as if its very mention might cause it to disappear. Both faces turned eagerly toward where I was pointing, then slowly became skeptical.

"I don't see it," whispered the girl anxiously, squinting her eyes tighter to scour the wavering boughs.

"It's right there," I said, with a hint of exasperation. I wanted them to believe so badly, I could almost see the shimmer of wings myself. It was a powerful feeling to create, spiced with the sinful tickle of playing God. A light wind picked up, causing the leaves and carpet of petals to shimmer and undulate, like an ocean. "*There!*" I pointed quickly, causing the two to cast their eyes frantically about. In the distance, it was hard to see where the branches crossed paths and where the leaves became the shadows of leaves. As the wind gusted again, their colors began to melt together. Twigs crossed and

recrossed, shadows were scattered by the dusty background of bark, the soft underbelly of the branches, leaves fluttering like pinioned wings.

Finally, the boy turned back excitedly, “I think I see it!” he called, instantly hushing himself. I looked to where he was pointing and gave a soft nod. Not to be outdone, the girl doubled her efforts, and cried at last, “Oh there she is.” She turned to me and smiled, “She’s beautiful.”

We left the park the same way we had come. The children at my side emerged with something new, however, marking a small but significant difference between their world and mine. Our two realities had become unbalanced, one accommodating for a tiny, extra soul. The children were grinning broadly at each other, and I smiled too, knowing of this subtle difference. It wasn’t a detail that either would ever think to change, there was no need to question the existence of what they had seen that day, and yet both had found the power to create something out of nothing. This was several years ago, but I like to think that when they are walking down the street, with their heads bent forward, or focused deep in conversation, the colors that swirl in their periphery still include an extra heartbeat of the fictional.

One might wonder if I feel guilty for playing such a trick. This wasn’t like Santa Claus or the Stork, myths that would eventually fight a losing battle with reality—myths which forced children to find fault in their own beliefs. An extra hummingbird in the world would always be able to fit comfortably into one’s intellectual files. I often wonder what of my own perceptions have long since departed from the realm of the factual. Once, while I was in India with Maya, we came across a patch of bright blue flowers in a smoky brown field. Each blossom was adorned with tiny white stigmas, like

deep-sea stones. Maya had told me the flowers were called “Ophelia’s Pearls.” We had spent the afternoon gathering them, taking turns sticking them in her willowy black hair. I was never able to find those flowers again, after that day. To tell the truth, I’m afraid to look them up in a book, lest I end up destroying what little definition I have left of her character.

I met Maya while I was studying in Delhi. She spoke quietly to me, sweetly mixing the inflections of her language with my own. I think it was something more than our studies that we shared, I think we were both looking for someone to trust. I had decided to spend some time overseas because I had realized I knew nothing about other cultures. It’s three years later and I have realized I know little more and, in fact, very little about my own world as well. The conflicts that have arisen in India are analyzed in many textbooks, as factually available as they have ever been. But studying them is like personifying your nightmares, giving them physical characteristics: weight, color, smell. There’s no need for this.

Perhaps I should stop, close my books, burn my carefully numbered notecards. What place do facts have in all of this? Why do you look there for authenticity? It should be enough for me to tell you how the dust from the road to Kashmir cuts across your eyes like a furnace blast. How it coats your tongue like incense. But if this account is to be truthful, it must be factual.

In 1947, as a result of the partition that took place in India, one million people died due to the emerging national and religious struggles. These people have all been correctly labeled: Indian, Pakistani, Muslim, Hindu. One million certifiable facts. One million birds that I never saw, that took wing and disappeared before I could give each of

them a name. Is this real for you, reader, who wasn't aware of this statistic? Have one million ghosts suddenly stepped into existence? What about Maya? I said goodbye to her on a crowded street in Delhi, while a sea of faces swelled and hurried around us. I was off to another life, and I watched her melt back in to the turbans and shawls that shimmered like leaves. I wanted to give her weight, color, smell, and not allow her to fade quietly into my dreams. I wanted to show her to the man sitting next to me, as we flew over the country for the last time. "She's right there," I would say, pointing through the clouds, through the sweltering layers of heat, past the numbers and the cold-hearted statistics, past the invisible borders that crossed between brothers, past the pain I had shared with her, and looking down, he would believe me.

“A man breaking his journey between one place and another at a third place of no name, character, population or significance, sees a unicorn cross his path and disappear. That in itself is startling, but there are precedents for mystical encounters of various kinds or, to be less extreme, a choice of persuasions to put it down to fancy; until—‘My God,’ says a second man, ‘I must be dreaming, I thought I saw a unicorn.’ At which point, a dimension is added that makes the experience as alarming as it will ever be. A third witness, you understand, adds no further dimension but only spreads it thinner, and a fourth thinner still, and the more witnesses there are the thinner it gets and the more reasonable it becomes until it is as thin as reality, the name we give to the common experience... ‘Look, look!’ recites the crowd. ‘A horse with an arrow in its forehead! It must have been mistaken for a deer.’”

—Tom Stoppard *“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead”*

Here’s what happened:

The planes flew ghostlike towards the towers. They looked like awkward, paralyzed birds, shrugging their wings helplessly to their sides. By the time the second one hit the cameras were rolling. I watched the haunting scepter glide forever closer to its target. The air seemed calm. It was indeed otherworldly and I admit, right up to the crash, I was expecting the plane to pass unharmed through the building, giving off a shimmer of translucence as the businessmen, the pilots and their passengers went calmly on their way. Those two objects, the plane and the tower, had nothing to do with each other. Until that moment, they had existed in completely separate realms. It made sense to me, therefore, that one should be able to continue straight through the other, without so much as a scratch of recognition.

People cried and hugged complete strangers. They cried and hugged me. They cried and shook their fists at the air. There was a lack of a better target. They shook them at the towers. I watched all of this from a coffee shop television in New York. If you looked outside, you could see smoke in the sky. The woman next to me was wailing hysterically, becoming faint, her face a mess of color. The man outside the door was getting drunk.

I wonder what conclusion can be drawn from this? I think about the people that day, who took to their beds or the bottle, convinced that the world was ending and trying to take solace in the fantastical realm of their dreams or an inebriated gutter. After that day, it became impossible for us to fly.

Two years later, I'm sitting on a plane bound for India. The people around me are noiseless and vacant. They are different creeds and colors, and everyone seems to carry a charged sense of nationalism. It was difficult for me to explain to my family why I wanted to take this trip. They reminded me about 9/11, repeating the numbers "*nine-eleven, nine-eleven*" over and over as if they were some sort of code that would unlock the ignorance in my head.

But let's talk about 9/11. I told you how I saw the plane moving steadily towards the tower, how I half-expected to see it pass peacefully through and continue on its path because those parts of life are not supposed to touch each other. It's like when you walk down a crowded street in the morning. You, and everyone around you, has a mission, a plan for their day. You brush shoulders on the subway or the elevator but no one's life is interrupted. When you get home, you talk about work, or traffic, or the cold you're coming down with. It's never mentioned, or known, that you passed by a man this morning who shares your love for the color orange, or a woman who sings the same wrong words as you do to your favorite song, or the child who already wants children of his own, or the teenage mother begging on the streets. These parts of life are not meant to be touched.

Sitting on the plane, I realize that we are being split into categories. The passengers are glancing furtively about the cabin. I am doing it too. We're separating



ourselves into two groups, those departing for India and those returning to India.

Travelers and returners. Americans and Indians. Countrymen and foreigners. Us and them. This I why I'm traveling. I want to destroy all of this. I want to be the plane that crashes into its target instead of passing idly through. I want to challenge my thoughts, challenge what people think of me. What side am I on? I am the arrow that is piercing the membrane of these separate realities. I am opening a wound, engaging in destruction, causing our blood to mix together.

Listen:

This is meant for you, reader. It is created solely for you. You should realize we're alone in this, us two. By no accident, we have crashed together instead of drifting aimlessly by one another in the dark. The sights and sounds in your periphery are not important now. They are the sobbings and wailings of the world, mourning this tragedy. It is a tragedy, when two things collide. Things must be destroyed, burned down, abandoned. I will do my best, however, to make it an easy transition. We can hold on to our conventions to the last minute, if you like. The meaningless lifejackets of Us and Them. The colors we use to tell where one thing stops and the other begins. What about God? It doesn't really matter in the end. Everything is destroyed in the wreckage. What you are holding, what you are reading is the flames, the debris of destruction. They will burn out and when they do, there will only be you and me, with no borders between us.

There is much about my trip I haven't talked about yet. Or have I even started? India appears below our plane, burning quickly through the clouds. Bold slashes of green and brown, cut into the countryside. I see the network of concrete veins that is the

nation's capital. I scan the streets below, trying to see people. The air as I step off the plane is thick and scalding. It hangs on me like an extra layer of skin. People swell and pulse on the sidewalks, pushing their sweat together, where it mingles on foreign skin. I am lost in an indifferent city. People move just as if I wasn't there at all. What, exactly, do I hope to accomplish here?

There should be characters. Players in this scene other than myself. I was in a city of millions, surrounded on the street by a thousand unknown extras. I found myself wandering about the city for hours, soaking in the sights, scents and delicious taste of fear that comes with not knowing what the next step will be. New Delhi grabs hold of you like a morbid fascination. I felt drawn to the city almost ashamedly, deriving pleasure from the thought that I had absolutely no place in this setting. The people that moved around me spoke in a beautiful myriad of syllables, their skin shone out wetly in the dust-dry heat. I watched one-armed beggars gesture feebly on corners. I saw children huddled in fly-covered masses. I read the habits of the city guiltily, like one reads a dirty magazine, ashamed and aroused by the sudden exposure. The place was somehow darkly sexual.

"Initials, blanks, or both were often substituted for proper names in nineteenth-century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality. It is as if the author felt it necessary to delete the names for reasons of tact or legal liability. Interestingly, as with other aspects of realism, it is an *illusion* that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means."

—John Barth "*Lost in the Funhouse*"

"\_\_\_\_\_."

It was as if the foreign air parted to reveal a cooling breath of the familiar. Her voice simply can't be done justice on the page. To do so would cage it, like a wild

animal. It's as if her voice had its own soulful eyes, its own heartbeat. This isn't a zoo—you'll have to use your imagination.

It was a kindly offering, an extension of a greeting. Her words floated over the undulations of gibberish in a lilting, broken English. If I could get you to believe each word as I do, while keeping them locked inside my heart, I would. But I suppose I will have to let them come now.

"My name is Maya," she said, once I had turned gratefully toward her. She slowly felt out each word in her delicate mouth, placing them gently in the air between us. I could feel it was nervousness that caused her to speak haltingly, she had beautiful English. She deserves description:

Only how am I to describe her? Should I give an account of all the things Maya uses to give meaning to her life? Her country, her family, her religion, her morals, beliefs, traditions? Or should I give her my own, the color of her hair, the way she moved among the crowd, the way she smelled—cool, even in the sweltering heart of the city. I'll let you decide which is more real.

She was Sudanese by birth. Her parents—I only learned how to address them foolishly, pathetically Western, as Mr. and Mrs. Manjari—moved here when she was three years old. They were both doctors, and had given her the best possible education, moving from private school to private school until she came to St. Stephen's College in Delhi. The Manjari's skin was slightly darker than most of the people local to the area, as if faint clouds were casting a shadow over the family tree. They were Muslims, and although religious differences were often sources of enmity, they had made many friends

in the surrounding Hindu neighborhoods. Maya was twenty years old. She worked on campus with the exchange program that had brought me here.

(Perhaps I had led you on to thinking we met by chance. I like it better that way, two people swirling about the streets of New Delhi, finding each other's voices in the crowd. She was my guide for this trip, my tutor. I suppose here, I can call her whatever I want: a stranger who drew herself close to me.)

I was filing these factoids away, birth, faith, upbringing, profession, aspirations, but meanwhile the greater part of my attention was paid to my own classifications. She had straight, black hair that was gathered modestly behind her in a loose ponytail (I'm sure she gave this style a much more fitting name). Her eyes were deep, full of dark silhouettes. They seemed knowledgeable of everything around them, and slightly saddened by whatever they had seen. She spoke with such a beautiful accent, I was forced to give it a category all its own. We faced each other politely as she introduced herself, but I was secretly, electrically charged by the fact that in the crowded streets, we were forced to stand quite close together, almost touching.

And there was the city. I had learned these facts too, I'll let you decide what is more real: New Delhi is the bustling capital of India. It was originally a British creation, which stood to the south of what is now known as Old Delhi. The architecture of New Delhi divulges its history of Imperial influence. The city contains approximately 14 million people, and is home to many different cultures and religions. While under British rule, Delhi became a hotbed for political struggle. When India achieved partition in 1947, New Delhi became the official seat of power for the new government. No longer

oppressed by foreign rulers and free to live in peace, one million doves were released in celebration of India's partition.

Were they?

But all of this says nothing of the heat one can see rising from the streets, the smell of sandalwood that clings to the storefronts before they open in the morning. And the spectrum of colors that greeted my eyes the first day: it was like I was being swept up in a torrent of dried wildflowers. Maya lead me to where the exchange students were to meet. She moved quickly through the throngs of people, gingerly letting her hand drift back so that I could follow. Suffocated by the stuffy air of the crowd and the intimate embarrassment I felt gazing at her gently trailing fingers, I wanted to pull her aside, out of this city, out of this existence. I wanted to speak to her in her native language. Or better, I wanted to make our own language, where I knew we could express how we truly felt, because these words ultimately fail.

And there I was, in the middle of it all: waiting to be described in another story. One without the spotlights of terror and war. I would play the role of myself. I would play it humbly: a meager dreamer, too inexperienced for an adult, too tall for a child—filled with an awkward innocence. I would set out to harden myself against the world but instead find it filled with people just like me. Unknowing, timid, ever-assuming, we would unite under commonalities that could not be physically described. I would find a girl who lured me with a magnetic pull, and I would be like a bird migrating home.

These words will fail, they have already failed. I thought I should warn you, in case you weren't already aware. Words can never join two people completely, they only

lure you close. Before you get the wrong idea, you should know that we were never meant to end up together, her and me. Something about the joining of separate worlds, the correct placement of social and cultural etiquette, the correct placement of my own words. “We were never meant to,” I explain, but do explanations matter when it comes to love? That is to say, the unbreakable pulling together of two bodies, over countries, over words, over bedsheets. Should I instead explain “We never meant to...”?

Before I found something to say to Maya, she was already waving goodbye as I was being shuttled off to St. Stephen’s. I had missed it. I am my own terrorist, I’m busy doubting, busy bombing, blowing to hell all of my chances.

But maybe I should explain what did happen to Maya: She fell in love. As the author, I am privy to this information, regardless if it exists outside of the current timeline. Knowing what I know now, it is truthful for me to say that Maya was in love. There were certain signs that were discernable to the public eye. One could see, in the right amount of light, her dark cheeks were flushed with a hidden excitement. Her dark eyes had brightened, and rolled giddily when she closed her lids. She almost never perspired, but had started to find the neckline of her blouse slightly damp when it pulled away from her breasts. These were all things that stood out against her normally conservative posture. The reader, too, having been able to see these signs running quietly through her frame, would have smiled and known the cause.

I saw her many times in passing the next few weeks, but we seldom had time to speak. At least I told myself it was because of the time. One afternoon, as I was studying in the library when I saw her quietly sit down a few tables away. Since our first day

together, I had tried to put the thought of her out of my mind but even now, I found it hard to concentrate on the book in front of me. I tried to catch her scent from across the room. I watched her spread out a stack of papers in front of her and brush her hair back, exposing a perfectly shaped ear.

Get it out of your head

If you still think it's going to happen, you might as well quit reading.

I slapped my book shut and slid it across the table, I strode boldly over to her table and, in one swoop, picked her vibrant body up in my arms, where she smiled and gazed knowingly into my eyes. My book was still open. I hadn't budged from my seat. I thought of what could have happened between us, had this been a different story.

Instead, I should introduce Satya. I can't keep the rest of the world locked out forever. He was in love with Maya, and she had fallen in love with him. He was my "other," the antithesis of myself. He was the man I became, when I indulged myself with fantasy. His name, he had told me, meant "Truth" and he stood out as Truth might: unwavering and inerasable. There are many things he was, which I was not. I guess you can call those characteristics. He was a native to India with handsomely tarnished, brown skin. It was tougher than mine, like exotic leather. He was a faithful Muslim. I have not introduced God as a character yet, but he loved Satya more than me. He was a dutiful servant to his country, despite the constant religious and political warring between Hindus and Muslims. He spoke to me in my own language, giving it a sharp, authoritative accent—the way I wished I could have talked to Maya. He always approached me cautiously, as if a sort of danger existed in the space between us. He

spoke of us as friends, but there was an uneasiness about it that restricted us to formal pleasantries. I often caught him watching me, while I was watching him.

Maya and Satya did their best to show me the city, and keep me company, Maya pulling him dutifully through the streets, and me lagging grudgingly behind. Looking into store windows, I would catch our awkward reflection. Two locals walking closely, connected shyly at the hands, and me: a softy tourist with pale, white skin, who came in hopes of bridging gaps and instead spent his days tagging along, as lost and alone as ever.

Enough of all this, I should talk about India. It's what I had come to do anyway: get the facts straight about the mysterious East. I'm still sitting in the library, watching Maya chew on the end of her pencil. She doesn't notice me. I'm alone, surrounded by the same books that had surrounded me back home—familiar company. The windows in the library were high, too high to see out of. The sounds of the maddening, foreign city were muted by the walls. There's comfort to be felt, in a stack of books—like an impervious wall. I was ready to research, ready to mark down the number dead, the number alive, the number of rebels, the number of converts, the whole sterilized history of this country.

The books in the library are always blurting out facts from their pages: “In 1803 the British captured control of Delhi.” “By 1921, 156,000 British occupants controlled over 306 million Indian subjects.” “Mahatma Gandhi founded the non-violent liberation movement in 1920. He was imprisoned in 1922, released in 1944 and assassinated in 1948.” “Partition grants the independence of India and Pakistan. Over one million people die this year as a result of the partition.” “1987: First suicide bombing in Sri Lanka by the



Tamil Tigers, a group dedicated to protecting the Tamil minority. Almost one thousand people have been killed in suicide attacks by this group alone.” “In \_\_\_\_\_, a suicide bombing killed \_\_\_\_\_ people.” “Another one, in \_\_\_\_\_, killed \_\_\_\_\_ people from the opposing side.” “The Muslim movement in India seeks to establish an identity independent of Hindu tradition and culture, and in doing so, has killed \_\_\_\_\_ people.” “The Hindu traditionalists in India seek to rediscover their culture before it was overthrown by Muslim rule in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They have killed \_\_\_\_\_ people in their efforts to do so.” What difference do the numbers make?

What we need are the facts—statistic accountability. Crunching the numbers of humanity, with pathetic little tally marks or rows of black beads. What shall it be, fifteen? Five hundred? Fifty thousand? There must be a numerical midpoint between piddling insignificance and unbelievably absurd, some point when suddenly the number of graves equal the number of empty plots you have sectioned off in your mind for this conflict. I suppose I can always fill these in later.

I was trying to give an accurate account of India’s tumultuous history, pulling shamelessly from headline after headline, but my thoughts were still focused elsewhere. I fortunately kept careful records of all accountable facts:

- *Religious violence in Kashmir, between government supported, Indian troops and Pakistan supported rebels, has increased sharply since 1999.*
- *In 2001, several bomb blasts leave 30 dead in Bangladesh.*
- *When Maya Manjari is concentrating, she likes to tap her right thumbnail against her two front teeth.*

- *In three days, from February 28 to March 2, over 2,000 people (primarily Muslims) were killed in Gujarat, India as a result of religious backlash in the area.*
- *Maya Manjari sits in a chair with perfect posture. Her shoulders fold delicately into her back, like the wings of a bird.*
- *Shiite mosque: Nine Islamic worshippers killed by terrorists.*
- *Kashmir: Islamic rebels execute 24 Hindu civilians.*
- *Every time she takes a breath, her eyes close.*

What am I supposed to do with these? Does this paint a vivid picture? Do I know a thing about this country yet? Is the unillustrated void of India filling up with sights, smells and haunting mass of graves? I steep myself in culture, but the people I see on the street fade quickly in and out of my consciousness. I haven't reached anyone. It's true that nobody cares. I don't know what I'm doing here. What am I supposed to be?

“‘I *am* real!’ said Alice, and began to cry.

‘You won’t make yourself a bit realer by crying,’ Tweedledee remarked: ‘there’s nothing to cry about.’

‘If I wasn’t real,’ Alice said—half laughing through her tears, it all seemed so ridiculous—‘I shouldn’t be able to cry.’

‘I hope you don’t suppose those are *real* tears?’ Tweedledum interrupted in a tone of great contempt.”

— Lewis Carroll “*Through the Looking Glass*”

Lying in bed, with the blankets thrown back and the humid night air billowing in through a window, I think back to the day those planes hit the towers. It’s not 9/11, that’s become too abstract, too off-topic for me. I remember sitting in the coffee shop, among the stony faces of morning commuters. One woman had buried her face in my shoulder. After a while, she looked up at me, leaving a gooey patch on my shirt of tears and

mascara. “I’m sorry,” she had said, “I’m a crier.” I didn’t know what to say to this, and I remember turning contemplatively towards the television as she buried her face once more.

It never seemed like a particularly useful definition to me. “I’m a crier,” is supposed to give you certain persona, set you within a certain group. The woman who said this to me was using it as a self-defined trait, to explain why she was making a mess of my T-shirt. There were a few others in the coffee shop who were crying too. I guess they were able to share something I was left out of, able to become part of a family.

Lying in my bed in India, I think about the people I have met, those I have categorized on the streets, those whose facts I have copied out of books. I used many different classifications: American, Hindu, dark-skinned, teen-age, educated, Shiite, homeless, activist, disabled. These have helped me create an ordered world. You introduce each one with “I am...” to give the person a sense of belonging, to set him in his natural habitat, to give him a reason.

Scott Provence is white. He is twenty-two. He is middle-class. He is a foreigner here.

The kid I’m sharing a dorm room with is only eighteen. He’s a foreigner too. His parents are rich. He belongs to a transplant Christian group at St. Stephen’s. He collects rare coins he’ll never need to use.

The man who begs on my street corner back home is a veteran who lost his leg (that is, he says he is a veteran, and he says he has lost his leg). He is an addict (he says he’s an addict). He is an atheist.

Satya al-Rashid is watching me. He pulls Maya away. Allah is watching me (He says Allah is watching me). He is قيديص, قيفر, ليجمز, ريصن, يبحاصل, or he is مصخ, ودع, ودعلا. One means friend, the other enemy. I forget which is which.

The man begging by the dorms at St. Stephen's is small, and very dark. He dribbles out soft, toothless words. The cup in his hand shakes.

Maya Manjari is betrothed. She is in love with someone else. She has a heart that is full of precious things.

The terrorist was tall and dark, full of truth. I met him in Delhi, just before I left for home. He was a Muslim. He wore a white turban on his head and carried a suitcase full of explosives. I spoke with him, unknowing, before he died.

All of these things are true. They divide each person into separate categories using labels of fact. I rely on these distinctions to tell you who I'm talking about. Understand? I show you the fool, the beauty, the one with bronze hair, the one with no eyes, the lunatic, the cripple. When the woman in the coffee shop looked up apologetically and explained "I'm a crier," I was unimpressed, and turned back towards the television, where black smoke filled the screen. So what, I'd cried dozens of times. Her description of uniqueness actually made little difference. The veteran on my street cried, so did the Indian beggar, who spoke toothless gibberish. Maya cried. The man with the bomb who spoke to me had cried. We were all criers.

Toward the end of my stay in India, Maya took our group of exchange students to a festival in Old Delhi. It was August 15, they were celebrating the country's independence from the British. The streets had swelled to their limit with bright faces

and joyous music. I was afraid that as Americans, we might stand out in the crowd, but as soon as we stepped into the current of people, all nationality was forgotten. Colorful braids of paper and large, ferocious masks were paraded above our heads, as we did our best to stick together. All around us, people were singing, clapping their hands, turning their faces to the sky. I saw the students around me gradually begin to melt into a state of enjoyment. The dirt that was kicked up around our ankles made all of our bare feet look the same, dusty red color.

I caught a glimpse of Maya at the front of our group, laughing freely with her head thrown back. She was holding on to the hand of a small girl, who was covered in strands of colorful glass beads. Both of the girls were singing, the younger one carefully watching the mouth of her elder, mimicking its shapes. The sounds reached a crescendo in my ears, and I felt the sun spread over me like a warm, full-breathed voice. Now people were dancing, kicking up more earth with their feet. I let the jostling arms and elbows of the crowd take me where they may, as the celebration reached an intense fervor.

I suddenly found myself close to Maya. She too was dancing, grabbing at the hem of her loose skirt and pulling it up past her knees. It seemed as if she had completely abandoned the shy, studious demeanor of the university, or that of the penitent bride-to-be when Satya was around her. I shifted stiffly from foot to foot, more out of embarrassment than out of rhythm. The mass of sweetly sweating people closed around us and suddenly we were on our own, the rest of the students forgotten behind us. All at once she turned to me, flashed an elated smile and before I could protest, had taken me by the hands and begun to dance again.

Which isn't to say anything. Which is to say everything. I remember her swirling me around, still singing in her native tongue. I remember the rest as well, the facts that crowded up against the moment: You're just another student to her. You're here to study, not to socialize. She lives in a different world than you.

But the urge to be a part of that world: not the one in which we danced, and the people around us raised flags in celebration of independence, but one where the words that she spoke were exotic and exciting, and free to mean whatever I took them to mean.

*"Take my hands,"* was what her words had actually said. *"Hold me close while we dance. Forget these people around us, forget the inevitable pull of our different lives. This is the story of us two, and everything else flies in circles around us."*

I am abandoning the role of narrator, I don't want it anymore. There are dozens of exuberant people around us, in love with life. Let one of them tell our story. How in the middle of the festival, there stood a pale, stiff-legged American and a dark-haired beauty holding hands. They both spoke a language that no one could understand. They spoke it softly, to each other, and as the singing around them grew louder, they had to draw closer, their lips almost touching. All of this happened, did you see it? I heard she was promised in marriage and he was off to another country. How is that possible? They disappeared into the throngs of people, still holding hands. The boy was smiling at the girl, the girl was watching the world that was smiling around them. Something has changed, there is now a slight difference between their world and ours. We see a boy and a girl, still held lightly in the arms of youth, but for them, there is something else: a seed

of desire that is awaking to a sudden warmth. We can't see it, we never will, but we've heard of this sort of thing happening before. And they lived happily ever after.

But let's begin before that, before the fanfare ending. An explanation is in order. Let's review:

The planes flew ghostlike toward the towers. The world shook their fists at the air (for lack of a better target) The air was black (for lack of a better color—bone charcoal, tears of grey). There was disgust, anger, horror (do you feel it?), we saw its face. Unsure of whether to hide or fight, we fought with our eyes closed. I cried (I'm a crier), I got on a plane. Somewhere before all this there was Maya, she was sitting under a tree. She was looking up at the sky through the leaves. There was Satya. He was going to rallies, he was raising his fist and crying (he's a crier) towards Allah. I came down out of the air, I breathed India. I put names to faces. I fell in love. The war moved on like a diseased, stumbling animal. I lived a romance fiction. Maya lived it with me. The world, the shouts of anger parted around us, giving way, like hair unbraiding around fingers. We fell asleep together under the quiet rush of birds and bombers and stars overhead. The violence in the country continued. My studies at St. Stephen's stretched on. I read books that gave me the important numbers. The number dead, the years oppressed, the years freed, the years fighting. These were the precision codes to unlocking the truth, making all of this a reality: I knew I'd find them. 1800 - 152,443 - 1947 - 1948 - 23 - 791 - 300,000. It all makes sense now, right?

And a list of the characters: There was Maya, like soft shadows stitched together. She would sometimes let me walk in the streets, arm and arm with her, but only if I

promised never to get back on a plane. She laughed at my hurried, love-filled words, and my foolishly empty promises. Satya was becoming less and less of a presence. He began ignoring me when we passed on campus. That was me the scholar, with my armload of books and head full of numbers. I'm sure he hated the scholar, like he hated the romantic. There was me the traveler, the one that boarded the plane with no books, an empty void of numbers and of love. He was the one who came here to break down borders, the one with the humanitarian plan to save the world. Where did he go? Was he swallowed up on the streets of India by the crowded masses? They are characters too, the thousands of movie extras, each with their own story they try to shout above the daily clamor. There are the Hindus—those who have sprung from the Indian soil, those who struggle against oppressor after oppressor—strong willed, and penitent. There are the Muslims—who have set their roots in the country, who have become like the soil. They struggle as well, they live and die by their faith. There was God, or should it be there was *a* god? The people in the country were killing each other over his name. They write it one way, rewrite it another way, and take turns dying. He was the creator of all of this, the man behind the scenes. The author, does he have a proper name? Do his characters truly know him? Are they ready to kill and be killed in order to please him, or are they simply a suffering collection of words and thoughts, brought into and snuffed out of existence at his whim?

Who's really in control here? I've seen what controls the country, what spirit inspires the heart, and the words give meaning to all of this. Where does the credit go? When I came into India, I learned how the British were able to keep such a large populous subjugated for so long. If they allowed, and even encouraged religious



dissentions and struggles, the people would fight each other instead of uniting in protest. The British rule survived with 20,000 foreign officials and troops ruling over 300 million Indians. These measly few became the composers of Indian history. Are they the creators, spreading the word of a united country, manipulating a public into subjugating itself against itself?

In a letter received from Indian Secretary of State, Charles Wood, to Lord Elgin:

“We have maintained our power in India by playing-off one part against the other and we must continue to do so. Do all you can, therefore, to prevent all having a common feeling.”

Or is the true manipulator resting on some higher plane of existence? Is it in fact the ineffable being in the name of which death is given meaning? He is the savior of the worthy, judge and jury of the wretched, the fighting occurs in his name. He is ever-present (he says he is ever-present) and will one day complete this masterpiece of existence. Each part is filled, the actors read their lines, make their entrance and exit. The play goes on.

Or is it just you and me, or is it just me? Am I just spiraling off into the dark, surrounded by words, by the echoes of words? I fall asleep at night clutching at the imprints of memories, waiting for an audience to take their seats. I'm alone now; these characters have long since dried up in the wells of my emotion. I've lost them, we have moved apart, they have moved out of my world. I feel ever-present (in this space, I am ever-present). Those who touched my life are blessed, they gain immortality on the page. They will outlast their maker.

And last in the list of characters: there is the reader:

“The reader! You, dogged, unisultable, print-oriented bastard, it’s you I’m addressing, who else, from inside this monstrous fiction. You’ve read me this far, then? Even this far? For what discreditable motive? How is it you don’t go to a movie, watch TV, stare at a wall, play tennis with a friend, make amorous advances to the person who comes to your mind when I speak of amorous advances? Can nothing surfeit, saturate you, turn you off? Where’s your shame?”

— John Barth “*Lost in the Funhouse*”

Here you are, poor reader, following my blind enticements. Sniffing out little sensory tidbits like a scavenging rodent. They are fruitless offerings; don’t you realize the trap is coming down? I want to reach you. I want you to give my memories life. There exists, I have told you, a woman with skin that smells of jasmine. I have felt the pressure of her lips, and I know they are real. I have felt the heat of destruction. It exists, I have told you. I have known the lingering smell of hollowed-out bodies. These things shouldn’t be experienced. This isn’t meant for you—but it’s all for you. Poor, motionless reader: Why should you have to create what I have tried for the last three years to forget? Why learn about the people in this world you never had a chance to meet. Or the ones you will never meet, what of them? What should you do with the ones who are dying now? Should I tell you about their favorite memory? Should I tell you which ones, unaware of their last breath, were humming quietly to themselves? Should we all fetch the same water from the wells of their eyes? Because you believe in them, these words will fail you. Fall in love with the scent and you’ll be left heartbroken at the end. The trap will have sprung and you’ll be left with eyes bulging and small, pink hands clawing desperately towards a fading nothingness.

We were clutching hungrily at nothing. It was dark—the air was full of warm shadows. Above us the birds and the quiet bombers flew from perch to perch, Maya lay beside me and whispered secrets into my ear with her beautiful native tongue. I watched the darkened swellings of the trees against the backlit sky. I remember the tiny pricks of

the ground against my back, the hardened reality we would have to return to in the morning. But for now, I was content to erase the entire continent for her. Send the extras home, forget the stories I had heard and the numbers that had been filed away in my head. I imagined the two of us at the center of the Earth. It was dark, there was no sun and the heat around us didn't glow brightly, but stirred and sweltered silently to itself. There was pressure, I could feel it on her lips. It had pressed the two of us together, falling inward from opposite ends of the world. We were at the beginning of time, the world bloomed outward of our sphere, running through its entire noisome history. In here, it was still silent and warm. We curled together, not sleeping, but quietly realizing the tiny haven our bodies had created, waiting to be discovered in the morning.

It was like waking up from a dream, and falling into another one. These were endless cycles of sleep that occurred in India, I fell from one fantasy to another. When we awoke in the morning, we unfolded wordlessly from the sleep-nestled grass. It had been a warm night, and the air was still calm in the early light. Maya's hair was beautifully tussled, as she worked the feeling back into her limbs. She smiled at me, and I thought I gathered a hint of sadness in it. She led me back to town without a word.

I should not be saying this. What right is it of yours to know? Then again, what we pretended meant nothing then should matter very little now. Besides, there are memories I cannot put words to, and will forever be crediting their reality with empty spaces. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

But the cold details of our lives inevitably returned. My study at St. Stephen's was ending. Maya was returning to her life, her heart was filling itself again with loves I would no longer be a part of. She returned to Satya, and I watched from a distance as he wrapped her in his arms and glared protectively over her shoulder. I was forever the outsider. The city was a glaring, dangerous rubble once more. Awakened by our fast approaching deadline, the exchange students began to stiffly gather back together, reestablishing themselves under the proper definitions. But I resisted this too, until I became completely alone, unable to fully associate with anyone.

I took to riding the bus around the city. It gave me a strange sense of comfort, it almost felt like home. I went farther. I took trains across the country. Here, it didn't matter who I was. Each individual sat in their own seat, staring fixedly ahead, their body gently jostling to absorb the impact from the ground. Hardly anyone talked, and if I awoke early enough, I was able to bus around the cities of India with the local, morning commute. In this group, each face was a blank slate of emotion, unable and unwilling to accommodate for anybody else. I knew this feeling well. I had run from it before but now, cast off into my own misery, I embraced it as my own, cold-hearted apathy. Those I rode with gave only the slightest shift of awareness to my presence, making an instinctive, almost imperceptible move toward the window as I came to sit by them. This was what I was used to. The harshness of the real world, the indifference that can exist even in this proximity. We jostle quietly to ourselves, but no one dares touch each other. These parts of life are not meant to be touched.

So what, do you feel your time has been wasted? I told you where this was going. We all end up alone. Even the mass of graves that exist in your head, the ones you have

used to pile the uncountable, unknown dead are carefully separated out—each life with its own, carefully rationed number. We are not supposed to meet, it's not written in the script. We shuffle onstage and off, the audience stays in their seat, not touching. Stay put: This wasn't meant for you, it's just a temptation, an literary trick. The trap is coming down soon, you can't escape and you'll never reach what it is you're hungry for.

I feel like letting everyone around me in on the secret, the other passengers, the ones with the faces like slate gravestone. I want to stand in the aisle and speak my piece, make my offering, but a man is already there. He is speaking to me, he's speaking to everyone. He wears a white turban and carries a black case. His words aren't angry, they are truthful. They stand out in the air like Truth might: unwavering and inerasable. I know this man, he is me in another life, another story. I get off the bus and he follows me, speaking the same words that I speak. We are offering the same thing, a distant hope of togetherness, a union. I hear him say, like I said, how he will be the destructive force that erases the boundary lines. He will be what causes our blood to mix together. I walk into the crowded street, he keeps talking, but this is no longer about us. I see him get into a taxi, our eyes meet as he drives off—watching him watching me. I know this man, we are the same person in another world, we have swapped roles in another story. He is my antithesis.

First to come in were the facts—coldly calculated: The bomb went off a little after one in the afternoon on August 25, 2003, in the middle of the Zaveri Bazaar and close to the Mumbai Devi Temple. At least 30 people were killed in the explosion. Ten more were killed shortly after in another blast nearby, outside the Gateway of India. More than

140 Mumbai locals and tourists were wounded in the two explosions. Early reports linked the bombings to Islamic terrorists, primarily a group known as the Students Islamic Movement of India. Mumbai Devi was a Hindu temple. These were the facts that were quickly rushed around the world. The thick-inked pictures hardly had time to dry before the papers started hitting the streets.

I was in the city, in the district. I felt the shake of the cement and the hollow thud that echoed down the street. I saw smoke rising from between the low-level buildings. I saw people emerging with dark, bloodied lips and dust-covered shoulders. I was there that night when the news came in over the television and people cried and hugged each other. A few reached for me and spoke with blotchy, red eyes, even though I couldn't understand them. Suddenly the empty faces that rode the bus or walked the street in stern profile opened up to me, their droopy mouths opening and closing. There was a great deal of tenderness, filling the hotel lobby where I stayed the night. Locals and tourists alike told each other stories, holding themselves around the middle nervously. Many stayed up together through the night, embracing each other like tragic lovers.

And there was me: I cried with them, I shook my fist at the air (for lack of a better target), I felt like I belonged to a family again. That morning we had passed through each other unnoticed but now, we were united again—a giant human mess of loss and emotion. I thought about what the man had said before he got off the bus. I had spoken to him, I had known him. He had come on the trip with me. He got off the bus right behind me. He spoke the truth as the truth might be spoken: fearlessly. He disappeared into a cab, in the trunk of which (the fact had come in) the bomb had been found.

I suddenly wanted to see Maya, to rush home to her. I was returning to Delhi the next day, and was to fly home shortly after. Walking through the hotel lobby late at night, with the pasty ghosts of tourists still wound up in each other's limbs, I felt a sickening need to return to something real. I wanted to swim down to the center of the Earth and curl back under the soft hollows of her skin. What about my love story?

I did return to Delhi the next day. I had left in the first place because Maya had abandoned me. Her life, she explained, was a path she had already started down. What I had seen in Mumbai made me return with an intense fervor, willing the train on as it speeded me home. Maya was not on campus, or her house. I searched the local spots for her, but found nothing. The people in Delhi were already returned to their lives. If they had heard of what had happened, they did not show it in their stern faces. It was different for us though, Maya would want to know.

I found her under a tree by the side of an abandoned building. She was staring up at the sky, twirling blades of grass between her fingers. She got to her feet when she saw me. I could tell she had been crying, her eyes were full of relief. Before I could speak, she rushed up and through her arms around me.

"I'm so glad you made it back," she whispered, forcing the air out as she grasped me tightly. I didn't know how much she had heard. I moved back to see her face.

"You know what happened?" I asked. She nodded sadly. I had been running through my head all the things I wanted to say to her. I wanted to start small: The shake of the concrete, the first thoughts I had when I saw the smoke, how she had appeared to me when I closed my eyes to clear the tears. No, I wanted to start big: The path her life was to take, the path of my life, the crossings and recrossings, like the surface of rivers.

The changes we could make, the life-giving diversions. I wanted to tell her about the way the man in the turban had spoken. The way he had looked at me, the way his face stood out against the cab window as I watched him drive off. The sound of the explosion when I suddenly knew. "I want to tell you what I saw," I began.

I had watched him go, fierce with truth, as truth might look on its final crusade. He had spoken boldly on the bus, on the train as well. He had come with me to Mumbai, had eyed me from a distance, at first speaking under his breath, toward the back of my neck, growing louder as the trip drew on. When we stepped off the bus, he was on my heels, speaking full-voiced and in both languages. I watched as he got into a taxi and drove off. The explosion shook the streets, and people were thrown into each other's wounded arms. That night, while people cried on my shoulder, I thought of how we had spoken before, the traits of his I had envied. The life I had wanted so desperately to call my own.

Maya was crying harder now, winding her fists in my shirt. As she cried, we held each other close, closer than before. In the rush of sobs I felt the outside world growing numb to my senses. Gradually, the heaving of her shoulders began to lessen and she grew quiet in my arms. I pictured us walking together, hand in hand. Not just today, but every day, our shadows stretching out in front of us as far as the eye could see. Nothing stood between us anymore. I felt the weight leave her, and a rush of emotion quickly filled the void. I thought of those people crying and hugging after the attack, that wasn't how to hold a person. One does it with their eyes closed, against a tree, where the last bit of warmth from the day can still be felt in the ground. One holds on, without the numbers and heartbreaking statistics, without the angered cries and clenched fists. One holds on like they're never going to let go.



“Everything leads to nothing: future tense, past tense, present tense. Perfect. The final question is. Can nothing be made meaningful? Isn’t that the final question? If not, the end is at hand.”

— John Barth “*Lost in the Funhouse*”

Dear reader: where does your ending lie? The two live happily ever after. I stay an extra month in Delhi. Maya experiences a new, tender freedom, she unfolds her wings. After she graduates, she comes to the U.S. We share a life together, falling asleep every night with the heat on and the windows open, like we’re back in India, curled together in the grass. As I am typing this, Maya comes into the room wearing pajama pants and a beat-up sweatshirt. Her skin always seems to be glowing. She sees me write this line over my shoulder and gives me a playful poke in the ribs. I’m typing for her benefit now. We turn off the lights, we stand apart and kiss gently, we tumble into bed. Is this what you’ve been hoping for?

What you’re doing is creating the image, piecing together the details, seeing if it can be allowed into your reality. Review what you know: I traveled to India. The student director for St. Stephen’s college was a girl named Maya Manjari. She was betrothed to a man named Satya al-Rashid, later found to be a member of the Students Islamic Movement of India. There was an explosion on August 25, 2003 that killed 30 people in Mumbai. There was blood and empty bodies in the street. The people shook their fists in the air. I went back to Maya. We fell in love.

But this is up to you. We fall in love if you can see the terrorist’s face. Look at us, we need this ending. What has to happen in order to assure this? You have all the facts, what’s missing? The bombs exploded, the air was black (for lack of a better color—bone charcoal, tears of grey). There was disgust, anger, horror (for lack of a

better target). We need a face. I saw him through the window as he drove off. Do you see Satya? Give us what's missing: His eyes were the hearts of coal, seething embers. His nose was beaked and sharply angled. I remember the look of caution that gradually turned to disgust, souring his features. He liked to pull menacingly at his hangnails, ripping them off with his teeth. He had a devilish grin, expertly practiced. When he spoke, it was always with authority. Every one of his movements was made with authority. When he walked with Maya, he hooked himself in her arm like a chain. I remember the last thing he said to me was in Arabic. I knew what it meant. It was him reaching out to me, destroying the boundaries that separated our worlds, ripping through the walls and the people that surrounded us until we were the same. He was tearing through and touching you, the reader. Close your eyes and follow the sounds and scents he leaves. They are horribly beautiful. They are the brittle twisting of bones, the furnace blast and the memory of sandalwood. He is becoming real, he is leading us closer to our paradise. What needs to happen in a love story? Our hero needed someone to conquer. Our awkward, love-struck hero, with too much of childhood left in him, fighting willfully against the glaring scepter of death. Everyone needs a villain. All the pieces are there, you know what to embrace, what to push away, who to hate, who to trust. All of this is necessary.

I fall asleep with Maya (I say I fall asleep with Maya) and as I bury my face in the cool currents of her hair, I'm reminded of how we got here. Or is it that I'm reminded of something I never had? Did I wake up one morning with the taste of something foreign on my tongue, a lingering dream that crossed into reality? Or was it like the day we shook our fists at the towers (for lack of a better target)? Was all of this done because of

a pathetic, human crutch? We mourn and sniffle at the ground until we catch a scent, that will lead us to justice, to the savory bliss of truth. After all, I made this all for you, reader. Poor, lonely reader, gorging yourself on the details. Devouring the numbers, the darkly grinning faces until finally you can say, “*There he is, there’s the bad guy,*” or perhaps of Maya, walking dreamlike on the other side of the world. “*There!*” you cry, pointing through the clouds, “*Oh, there she is...she’s beautiful.*”

For all those lost, the ones you never new—they become light as birds, as the shadows of birds, winging across our consciousness as you count them, “*Thirty dead, ninety-three wounded...*” You still get angry, but you put trust in the faces you see. The man arrested, the man who took his own life. Because we can see him, can hate him, can kill him, we have a chance for love.

Why is it we need a face? I still see Satya’s (can you see still him?). Did he ever exist? It doesn’t matter, these words will fail, and we will lose our way again. After all, this was created for you, reader, and already their existence is thinning. Where do you get off, when does reality step back in? We were so close, her and I. She, a fiction-child, asleep in my arms for an eternity. We needed something to unite against. You and I, we need a face, a sickening blast, a cold-hearted statistic, in order to break through the cold exterior and embrace. We have found each other through these words, feeling tenderly through the wreckage, the soot-black air, the bodies (empty because they never existed for us). We follow the trail of scents, of sounds, searching for ourselves, searching for love. But the things around us fail. These words fail, paradise evaporates, and with the thought of victory so close. Poor reader. Poor, motionless reader, you only had a little farther to reach...

## Artist's Statement

One of the hardest things in fiction writing is being able to create believable characters and storylines. While the reader wants to believe everything he or she reads, there will always be a skeptic lurking underneath, one who questions the validity of the words before them and ultimately dismisses anything that does not match up with reality. Because books are already divided into fiction and non-fiction genres, there is an unspoken agreement, between author and reader, of what is and is not real. Therefore, as a reader begins a book, they have already determined what facts will be given credibility and which aspects of the story are constrained to the realm of the fictional. If a book is described or labeled as non-fiction, then no matter how foreign the subject or characters involved, they are allowed to exist within the reader's reality. As he reads, he is creating new spaces for them in his world (the common experience of learning—creating new categories of knowledge that did not exist before). If a book is fictional, the characters in it are still allowed to take shape, but once the reader puts the book down, they fade back into fantasy.

This seems like an odd distinction to make, however. Books are split into different realities based not on the reader's familiarity with the topic, but rather by relying on the author's promise of "fiction" or "non-fiction." It seems like most of what we "know" is based on faith. I cannot prove that anything exists outside my own memories and sensory perceptions. Everything else has been taught to me, and has been accepted because it is filed under the "factual." Aren't these just more stories though, more characters I hear about, but will never meet? What is the difference between these stories and the ones I read in novels? This is a question I had always wanted to explore but, in the past years, it had taken on a new significance. We are currently in the middle of a war, where enemies are being manifested by our own media and government. These characters are created, given factual weight, in order to motivate us toward some goal, instilling fear that such people exist in the same world as ours. It's doubtful that I will ever meet any of these people, why am I so afraid of their existence?

This piece is meant to rattle the borders that lie between fiction and reality. It's odd to feel like some characters of a story can be "real" (like the death tolls I quoted) and others can be fictional (like Maya and Satya) while still existing in the same space. This piece can be seen as falling under the genre of "metafiction" precisely because it does this. Instead of being regulated to the realm of fact or fiction, this genre breaks down the walls between the character and the reader, between the author and the reader, until we all exist on the same plane. It seems that this is the kind of existence we should all be striving for anyway.

## References

- Barth, John. *Lost in the Funhouse*. New York: Doubleday & Co., 1968.
- “British Empire.” The National Archives. 12 May 2006.  
<<http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/empire/g2/cs4/background.htm>>
- Carroll, Lewis. *Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1992.
- “Genocide in Gujarat.” The South Asia Citizens Web. 2005.  
<<http://sacw.net/Gujarat2002/GujaratReportCAG0305%202.pdf>>
- Jagtiani, Lata. “Mumbai Blasts on August 25, 2003.” Hindunet.com.  
<<http://www.hindunet.com/forum/showflat.php?Cat=15,44&Number=33386&page=0&view=collapsed&sb=5&o=&fpart=1>>
- Pande, Dr. B.N. *The Hindu Muslim Problem*. New Delhi: Gandhi Smriti & Darshan Samiti, 1995.
- Scaruffi, Piero. A Time-Line of the Indian Subcontinent. 1999.  
<<http://www.scaruffi.com/politics/indian.html>>
- Stoppard, Tom. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1967.