

Benjamin Lebert

Die Dunkelheit zwischen den Sternen

The darkness between the stars

© 2017 S. Fischer Verlag

Translation by Kirsten Loeff

ACHANDA [p. 7-8]

The sun is a traitor. She is not shy like Misha, who lowers her eyes. She does not compromise like Housemother. She does not embellish. She stretches out her shimmering fingers and says here, here and here. Here, she says, the mangled body of a fish in the dust abuzz with flies. Here, the stray dog: stiff, ragged, famished, beggar. The wet nose, his navigator. He still lives, although he should know better.

We know each other, the two of us. We belong to Kathmandu, the city with roads red as pomegranates. We have much in common. We cannot escape each other and yet nothing is gained from our friendship.

Here, the light-skinned girl on a billboard, hanging on a wall above the leaning balconies. The girl on the billboard is happy, because she is drinking the sweet liquid that tingles on your tongue like tiny fireworks. Next to her, a second billboard: the same drink, different colors. A different girl, also light-skinned. Also happy.

Here, here and here, the motorbikes—rumbling dark metal beasts—that hunt down the city's living and the city's ghosts, as if they were prey. I dream I will have one too, one day. It will not be much longer. Then I will cover my face with a kerchief and my head with a helmet and I'll wear those goggles that erase your eyes. Then I'll ride off. A swirl of dust behind me, and there will be nothing left. Not even the memories.

I will bring Shakti with me. She won't be the silly girl who hops on one leg and sings the crocodile song anymore. She will be something else. Grown up. And pretty. Yes, she'll be very pretty. And she'll be happy when I take her with me. And the metal beast will listen to my orders alone and carry us away.

The sun lies. Just like the night lies. The night lies because it hides all, yet gives no shelter. The sun lies, because she reveals everything. Even that which is not there.

SHAKTI [p. 193-197]

There is joy in the kitchen. The children are chattering loudly and crowding around Nele-Sister, who's standing at the stove. They feel the heat of the flames under the pan, and watch as the kernels sizzle in the sugar and oil, and are mesmerized. So mesmerized, anticipating what's about to happen. Even Housemother laughs. And the Brother lets Raj sit on his shoulders so he, too, can see.

There is a joy in the kitchen. It is trying to slip into my body, trying to find a way to get in. But I will not let it in. I don't want it. It should stay out.

Nele-Sister's voice sounds happier today and kinder than usual. Yesterday she rode in a crowded tuk-tuk. And was able to watch as the big Ring Road passed by underneath, because the tuk-tuk didn't have a real floor anymore. Then she switched to a second tuk-tuk. She rode across the whole city in order to visit a special house where people worship the peace-loving Son of the God who pleases her so much.

She will have prayed to Him. And her voice will have altered. In prayer, all voices become beautiful. And they stay like that. For a while.

Nele-Sister talks and talks. She says it will happen at any moment. That it will go POP! And again and again, POP! That the kernels she brought us will soon no longer be

able to stay with the heat in the pan and they'll fly into the air and will burst open and be something completely new. And then, when we eat them, we'll know just how delicious they are.

She says this, and so much more, and I'm supposed to translate to the other children. But I don't feel like translating. My voice is not beautiful. The peace-loving Son of Nele-Sister's God does not know my voice. And, likewise, my voice does not know *Him*. My voice sounds lonely, empty.

Then it really does go POP! Again and again. And Nele-Sister puts a lid on the pan. And the kernels pop up against the lid, and it sounds like a drum, and a few of the kernels manage to jump out into the open, and they really do look like something completely new.

The children shriek with delight and fight over those that have landed on the floor. The tiny white and sugar-browned puffs disappear into this and this and this mouth. And even the flames under the pan devour a few.

When it no longer goes POP! the Brother brushes the sugar-puffs from the pan into a bowl. Now he holds the bowl at his belly and acts as though he doesn't want to give the children any. But then of course everyone is allowed to reach into the bowl as often as he likes. I don't reach into the bowl. For me, I'm not tempted by the white. For me, I'm not tempted by the sugar-brown. I've had enough of the kitchen.

I run out into the passageway, and there is Achanda. He's leaning against the wall. He, too, does not look happy this morning. Not at all. He looks exhausted as if his eyes had visited somewhere very dark.

When he sees me, he attempts his usual smile. He should stop doing that. I don't care to see it. In fact it's the very last thing I want to see right now: this smile of his. But his smile won't go away.

He's holding something in his hands. It's a flower, once again a flower. This time it's not one he made. It's a real one. It's small, but its colors are bright.

Achanda's hands hold the flower with care. It does not mean anything to me.

"It's a special flower," he says. "I've been told it has protective powers."

"From what should I be protected?" I say, angrily. "Here, in this Recovery Home, everything is good, right? We're happy children, right? We're safe. And anyhow, what does it matter to you if I'm safe or not?"

Achanda looks at me sorrowfully. "Please take it, he says. And again, very quietly: "It will protect you."

I take the flower and tear it up in front of his eyes.

He looks shocked. "What's the matter?" he asks.

I say nothing for a long time; I let him feel my silence. Then I say, "We'll never be able to ride a motorbike together. I know it, and you know it. You'll soon be with your uncle. Your hands can continue to make flowers, and pick them. But that changes nothing. Don't pretend you can protect me. Because you can't. And you don't want to either."

He calls my name. But my name is so small inside his mouth.

I run out of the house.

ACHANDA [p. 237-40]

Suddenly I'm aware of a voice in my ears. A bird's voice. But it does not belong to a bird. The voice belongs to Tarun.

He's standing in front of me in his wide pants and pullover. With his mean eyes. And he's talking at me. There's restlessness under his skin that you can't see, yet you can see it. You can see how it twitches, the way he looks around, worried that someone might notice us.

"I'll tell you again, please!" I say. "I didn't listen well."

"Well then, listen now," says Tarun. "It's important," he says. He asks me to look for the girl. The girl who's named Kalpana. Whose name he sometimes whispers to himself. Whose name he speaks at night when he weeps and we cannot sleep because of him.

"She's in that house," he says. "The house that belongs to the rich lady who came to the Recovery Home to scold me the day before yesterday. The girl works there. I can no longer go to that house," he says, "because they know me there. Because I broke two of their windows."

"But you, they don't know. You are big and strong. You need to sneak into the basement of that house, and check to see if she's there. See if she's okay. And when you see her, tell her I've not forgotten her. That she will soon be freed."

I say, "Have you spoken with Śarana? Certainly he can help you."

"Yes, I've spoken with Śarana," he says. "He wants to help. But it will take too long. Śarana's useless. Śarana's too busy. This is why I've come for you. Even though I didn't want to. Even though you're as good as nothing to me."

“Fair enough,” I say. “I wouldn’t have done it anyway. It’s way too dangerous. And what would I get out of it? What would I get, if I end up in trouble because of you?”

Tarun says no more. He looks at me, and his restlessness is even more evident. I notice the effort it takes for him to stay calm. I suddenly feel sorry for him. And I notice I’m even a little proud of him, because he was brave enough to speak to me. Because in fact, he seems to do a lot of brave things that others, who are angry with Tarun, know nothing about.

I think about it, that the rich lady in the neighborhood already trusts me, because of the many things I’ve done for her. Even though Tarun knows nothing about this. Even though I’ll not tell him about any of this. It wouldn’t be difficult for me to sneak into her house. I know it well. I think about whether I’d seen a girl there before. But I remember no girl.

Tarun is still standing in front of me. He’s so small, so alone. And he has nothing. Nothing—except thoughts of this girl. Suddenly it becomes clear to me.

“All right,” I say. “I’ll do it. I’ll look for the girl in that house. I’ll do it tomorrow. The next time you’re here, on the playground. Then, it will be good to...”

SHAKTI [p. 253-54]

The dreams, the evil dreams, want to take me prisoner in the same the way they take the other children prisoner. But, one word saves me. One name: Achanda.

There are names from which the evil dreams retreat. They have no choice. The evil dreams did retreat and suddenly there was a passage through the darkness.

Away, out of the room where the girls sleep, into the corridor. Into the outdoors. And there he is. As he is nearly every night.

The two of us sit next to one another on the small stoop in front of the door in the ice-cold air that helps us think clearly. Under the stars that spread across the heavens. Achanda and I sit next to one another, and although it is night, we are aware of each other's presence. We feel it, both of us.

"Tomorrow you'll be gone," I say to Achanda. "No, not tomorrow. In only a few hours, already before the sun comes up, Śarana will be here to get you. Śarana is punctual. Nearly always."

"But at night," says Achanda, "at night, when the sun has gone down, I will be here again. And then, in a couple of days, we'll drive away together on the motorbike. If only you had seen it already, like I have. If only you had seen how beautiful it is. It's smaller than Śarana's motorbike, but it's more beautiful. Yes, much more beautiful. And it will take us up over the hill. To the holy village."

I make up my mind to ask Achanda something I don't want to ask: "And what then?" I ask. "Where will we ride to then?"

Achanda does not answer. For a long time, he does not answer. "There are many villages," he then says. "Trust me. There are many villages."

"Yes," I say. "As many villages as there are stars up there." But the darkness between the stars is much, much bigger.