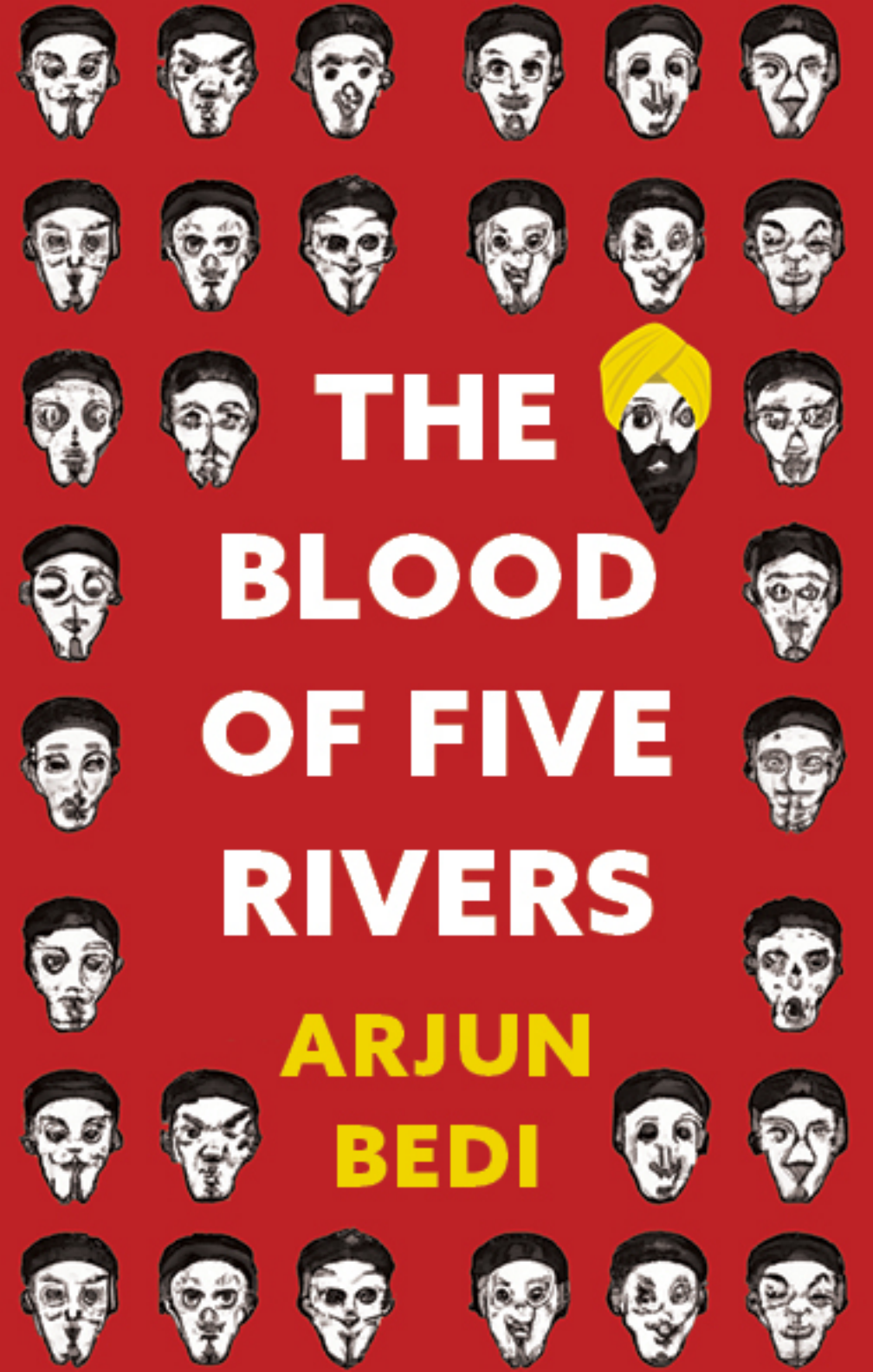
THE
BLOOD
OF FIVE
RIVERS
ARJUN
BEDI

The Blood of Five Rivers

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For my family.

Not in any sense of the word will this narration be reliable. It won't be reliable in the semantic sense because this is a story composed of memories that are not my own, memories excavated with bias, and too much separation from the source fouls the purity of a thing. And neither will it be syntactically reliable, because my mind is constituted by all the voices that have shaped it, all of them diametrically opposed, and they enter and leave as they please, coming and going with all their contradictions, inaccuracies, and idiosyncrasies.

How, then, to shine light on those stolen memories and to harness those voices into a cohesive whole? It's no simple affair, so I'll have to use all the tools at my disposal, all the structures of knowledge I have access to, each a lens offering a unique insight—the world witnessed through my five senses, the testimony of my ancestors, the revered fictions of creased and yellowed novels, and the tangled outcomes of foreign histories. This is the burden I bear—the task of communicating this story by any means necessary.

But even in this I know I will fall short, because the past is not available to us like some vast reservoir. We cannot view it as we do an endless ocean from the shore, to see the high crests of our victories and to peer into the nebulous depths of our failures. Our experience is rather limited. We view the past through peepholes, narrow telescopes that display barely moving vignettes, and we give them colour through the tint of our emotions, but we can never recreate the picture as it

truly was. As we look back, we see a world tainted by the transience of our present circumstances. We are voyeurs of things we can hardly understand.

Which brings me to the pressing question: If the task is so near impossible, why bother? Well, for one, because "understanding" has never been the point of remembering. Memories sit stubbornly in the mind not because they are accurate but because they are malleable—shapeshifters ever ready to change their form in service of whatever end we can imagine. And it is because of this that we can use them as raw materials in the construction of a story that offers some feeble fulfillment of that desperate desire for meaning.

Yet, aside from this general and theoretical justification, I am also driven by a more personal motivation. You see, this particular story has become something of an inescapable compulsion for me. It cycles though my head, again and again, and like a disregarded barfly or an old miser abandoned at a retirement home, I find myself rehearsing these lines as if an enigmatic young journalist might sit next to me one day, and ask: "So what's your deal?"

In that sense, perhaps the goal is simply to unburden myself, to objectify these words, like etchings on a tombstone, so they exist outside of me, so they can consecrate the useless remains of something once living. Or maybe there is no point at all, in which case allow me to go forth with a conceited hope—a wilful denial of the presciently obvious—that the purpose of this exercise will be revealed at its conclusion.

In the meantime, I'll turn my attention to something more practical: The beginning. And where else to begin but a birth—not of a child, but something grander and more clearly defined than a human being. For now, we focus our attention on the birth of a nation.

1947

Once upon a time, the world was at peace. At least, where my grandfather was born, where he grew and where he lived, there was peace. But elsewhere, a man sat in a room with a pen and a map, and as my grandfather sat in a relative state of tranquility, a line was drawn across that map. So subtle a thing, surely it should have had no consequence. But peace is fragile, and so easily was it torn apart by that line, and so easily was the fabric of my grandfather's reality torn apart with it.

Once upon a time, my grandfather had sat under the shade of old trees, the sky stark blue and the sun bright, and he watched the labourers laugh and joke as they worked the fields. He would smile shyly at the young women who were young girls when he had been a young boy. He would walk next to his mother, carrying her bag of fresh produce from the market, and listen to her speak about his future—that he would one day oversee those happy workers, that he would one day marry one of those young women, and that he would one day walk through these same markets with his own child.

Once upon a time. It is the correct way to speak of things, because all that is contained within that phrase is no more than childish fantasy, a fairy tale, where futures are certain and lasting peace is structurally built into the universe. But that is not what happens in *our* universe.

Because a line was drawn, the fairy tale evaporates. Because a line was drawn, his mother collapsed next to him as a lead ball with dimmed velocity burst forth from her chest, and he halted for a moment as the crimson mist settled onto his skin. And from her knees she opened her mouth to speak, but only blood welled out.

He ran, the muscles in his legs contracting and expanding of their own volition. Black ash fell, black clouds rose, and flames flickered, diaphanous against the blood-red sky. No laughter and no jokes; the limbs of labourers severed and strewn all around, and dead eyes from broken faces peered up at him, while his legs continued to run.

The fire clawed at his back and singed the tendons of his heels. His mouth was smoke-coated; the smell of burning flesh and noxious gasoline fumes blistered his nostrils and throat. Old trees burned red against the horizon. His home burned.

The market, where fresh produce once lay in neat stacks and stubborn housewives haggled for discounted prices, was a mirage of hell. The mouths of homes, gaping maws that exhaled black air and screams of the dying. The dirt beneath his feet was soaked in blood, a black mud that pulled him downward. His legs continued to run.

A gentle river, once clear and clean, was now crimson and transported the bloated remains of the once living and once laughing—young faces he had smiled at shyly, young faces he had envisioned a future with.

"Pajo!"[1]

Screams and screams. A strangled child hung limp from the arms of a screaming woman.

Carbon erupted, lead flew, and metal clanged.

Everything ached.

Carbon erupted, lead flew, blood soaked into dirt, and a limp child rested next to its limp mother. The screaming stopped.

1 Run!

Mouth ached for water untarnished by blood.
Lungs ached for air untarnished by smoke.
Eyes ached for a horizon untarnished by flames.
Heart ached for a home untarnished by death.
But all the world was blood, smoke, and flames.
All the world was tarnished by death.
"Je jena chondeyein, pajo..."[2]

2 If you want to live, keep running…

The Darkness After Dawn

1956–1958

Two things conspired to greet the child on the day of his birth: heat and humidity. Of course, this confluence was neither rare nor unique, as both these elements operated blindly in regard to human affairs, and where the child was born, they were both at work daily. Even the midwife, who had walked fourteen kilometres from her village to the east to deliver the boy—and was like many in her country, prone to a fixation with star arrangements and other potential markers of auspicious things—did not consider anything about the day to be rare or unique. While executing her duties, she held the loose assumption that this was nothing more than the birth of yet another unexceptional farmhand.

The boy did not wail or cry as he emerged from the womb, as might be expected, but with large, dark eyes he expressed curiosity, swallowing the world in hungry glances. The child's father, who was outside distributing sweetcakes made from ground sugarcane, was called inside. He looked at the boy and asked, "Eh sidah ah?"[3] The midwife shrugged and slapped the boy on his rear and then he wailed. Her hands, conditioned by the rigours of subsistence living, were rough and calloused, and when he was handed to his mother, he found hers were rougher and more calloused. She held

3 Is he stupid?

the child close to her chest, exhausted and still in pain from the delivery. When she had given birth to her first child—a daughter who was being cradled in her father's arms—she had been fortunate enough to be given poppy seeds steeped in milk. This time she was not so fortunate and received only turmeric steeped in milk.

Many villagers could not muster the energy to care about the proceedings at hand. The few who had come to offer their congratulations did not stay long. Fields required tending and cows needed milking. In the heat of the midday sun, many were simply eager simply to find some shade. The humidity stifled the rising dust kicked up by the baba's bicycle tires on the single road out of the village. He arrived that morning from Amritsar to speak with the boy's grandfather, a man with a soft face, features too crowded toward the centre, and a beard that was too easily pierced by the light of the sun. The old man spat on the ground as he spoke to the baba, and it landed on the foot of the Chuhra, who was on his haunches, slicing tall blades of grass with a sickle. Neither man looked down and the Chuhra continued his work, half listening to the conversation, which was not about the newborn, but rather about old grievances.

The father, a predominantly silent man (timid more than stoic), watched the boy tremble in his mother's embrace and raised his voice again. "Eh comjor lagdeh."[4] But the midwife was unable to conjure any sympathy. She dipped her hands in a water basin, the water already tinted pink, and remarked, "Hun tan rab de hath de vich ah."[5] The mother did not concern herself with her husband's worrying. Instead, she cradled her child closely, gently cooing to ease his migration into the world. The midwife collected her payment, a bag of grain which she slumped over her shoulder, and exited the shady room into the oppressive heat. It was a long march back to her village and she aimed to return before dark.

4 He looks weak.

5 It's in God's hands now.

The father said nothing more, his features soft like his own father, crowded toward the centre of his face, but with a life still too short for old grievances. The boy had his mother's face, sharp in all aspects: a sharp nose, a sharp chin, and a sharp stare. Though, at the moment, his mother's face was softer—an uncharacteristic sentimentality—and it rested on his face, on his large blinking eyes, and to him alone she said, "Mera Kaka."[6]

Here are some things that must be mentioned. The day of his birth was 23 June 1956. The location of his birth was Ahmedpura, a small village on the outskirts of the farming township of Patti, which is within the municipality of the Sikh religion's spiritual capital, Amritsar, in the state of Punjab. Ahmedpura is eight kilometres to the west of Patti, and Patti is forty-five kilometres south of Amritsar.

Know I include these precise and impersonal details sheerly out of necessity. Such brute specificity is apt to subtract from the sublime nature of occasions such as these. For the romance of myths exists in their obscurity and as much as possible should be done to protect that magic. But it is also true that these events happened in space and in time, and in order to chart the trajectory of our protagonist, we need to mark his point of origin.

Now there is a schism, a rapid alteration and reversal that occurs and is absorbed in the supple preconscious mind of the child called Kaka. The mud hut he was born in was home for as long as it took for him to hold his head aloft, unassisted. Then he was routed from the fertile soils of Punjab to the sun-bleached grey tarmac of the country's capital. Here, the streets did not kick up dust but produced a mystifying haze as the heat arrived and retreated, as so many things did in New Delhi. It distorted the visual spectrum, elongating limbs from a distance, pulling things in and out of focus

6 My little baby.

at whim, and in general, offered a wobbly representation of reality.

Here he learned to walk. He yearned, reaching forward with all his being, producing hasty steps that swung his weight wildly from side to side. The sturdy anchor of his mother's finger was there should he have needed it, but his ambition was too great. He waddled, waddled, waddled, and collapsed, falling forward and scraping the soft skin on his knees and palms. The skin would scab and become calloused like the hands of the woman who stood back with her arms folded, waiting for her son to stop wailing and pick himself back up.

The father left in the mornings to his coveted, yet inglorious job as a maintenance worker for the city's sewage and plumbing system. As he trudged knee-deep through the city's excrement, Kaka waddled above, tugging at the hem of his mother's chunni until she relented and took him to the bustling streets. Kaka breathed the world in and he saw millions of people engaged in millions of tasks. Alleys jut in and out of larger streets, which smelled of burning oils, incense, fried alu, golgappa, and fresh manure from the sacred cows of Hindu and Sikh clerics, who shouted their admonishments and proclamations to half listening pedestrians. The impression of a greater world was slowly seared into Kaka's mind, and with it, the axiom that all the wonders such a world might offer can be taken back in an instant.

Trudging knee-deep in the city's excrement did not pay a high enough salary for supporting a family of four. It was naive to believe otherwise. So the fragile dream of the father was shattered by the pressures of the world. The mother, the sister, and little Kaka, who wouldn't stop waddling, were sent back to the pind[7] again.

It was nightfall when the three arrived at the mud hut in Punjab. It sat at the edge of the pind, adjacent to the few acres of land that Kaka's grandfather has secured with

7 Village.

his small fortune. Kaka's grandfather was too old, too concerned with old grievances, and too bitter because of them to engage in commerce, so his son's family would have to take the wheat grown on his land and sell it in the markets at the town square. Specifically, this task would fall to the young boy as soon as he became capable of hauling the weight of the harvest through the streets. But none of this was known to Kaka. All he knew is that he could sleep in the dusty corner where his mother pointed her finger. All he knew is he liked the feeling he felt when his legs carried him forward. All he knew is that somewhere out there, something greater awaited.

1991

Are you curious about my birth? Well, you shouldn't be. If the midwife was present at my birth, she would roll her eyes, throw up her hands, and scoff. All the precautions, all the safety and sanitation, the painkillers flowing through translucent tubes, the rubber gloves and plastic goggles to protect the nurses' painted nails and fabricated eyelashes, and the doctors in white coats and nurses in blue smocks, and more fabrics of white and blue draped over everything to conceal the gritty, gruesome, and *red* reality of childbirth. All in all, generally too much mothering of the mother and certainly too much babying of the baby, and none of it auspicious in the least! At least, that's what the midwife would say.

But what does her opinion matter? During this entire episode, I consider myself something of a hero, because I decided to arrive while my mother was delivering newspapers door to door, in the grip of a cold February storm. A saviour was I, from the toils of minimum wage labour, an emancipator of the working class. In those early hours of the morning, when the world was cast in the dark blue glow of Canadian winters, as she squinted her eyes against the flurries of snow and desperately dug her frozen hands into her coat pockets after throwing another paper at another door, I took notice of her anguish and gave her respite the only way I could—by demanding life.

The witnesses of my magnanimity include my brother, the First Man, who steps forward to navigate the rocky and craterous geography of second-generationism before me; my father, who possesses a mysterious infatuation with the nation of Germany (and thus is aptly dubbed Der Vater); his sister and her brood, among whom is present my first cousin, Toucan Sam. This name, along with the others, requires some explanation, I'm sure, but that will have to wait for another time. For this is my day, and all eyes shall remain glued on me.

So, what do I look like? Cradled in my mother's arms under the dim glow of a hospital bed lamp, do I resemble her at all? Perhaps I do, but she does not belong in these pages, so we will not dwell on the particulars of her visage, intelligent and optimistic as they are. Maybe my father, then, whose eyes are dark and deep-set, further darkened from lack of sleep, and who has an impressive stature, heavy arms, broad shoulders, and a subdued presence that somehow manages to fill the room. His features are sharp and angular, inherited from his mother who I should mention is also here in the fray today. She stands at the foot of the bed, arms folded across her lean torso, the wiry muscles of her forearm flexing and relaxing, and the hint of a frown resting on her face. Her husband, however, is regrettably absent. My grandfather, the father of my father, was called in for the dreaded night shift, working security at the international airport, where he is also paid minimum wage to absorb the vitriol of uncooperative motorists who insist on idling in no-idling zones. In all honesty, as a squirmy newborn, I probably resemble him the most as currently my soft, undeveloped features are intolerably crowded toward the centre of my face.

What follows over the course of the next several hours is this: A barrage of advice from the medical professionals that would cause the midwife to throw a fit. A slow car ride through the semi-slippery roads with clean, yellow paint separating the lanes, which drivers are taught to stay in, and—in stark contrast to behaviours displayed at airport no-idling

zones—actually abide! They even flash their little blinkers when they switch lanes and move only 10 km/h over the speed limit before calmly re-entering the cruising lane, just as is depicted in the provincial Driver's Handbook. Suffice to say, this is all quite awe-inspiring to me, who like any new arrival to Canada, is witnessing such lawful auto-motoring for the first time.

Then I am taken to the homestead, a lovely little abode Der Vater fell for once he set his eyes on the foreclosure price. As soon as the festering crow corpse was scooped up from the master bedroom en suite, and the pentagram drawn in ominous red paint was scrubbed clean from the basement wall, it was home sweet home. The neighbourhood roads are clean and empty. There are no crops growing nearby, no scent of manure in the air, nor the piercing sound of holy house bells at ungodly hours of the morning. Rather, I experience the bliss of secular silence and the flat and inoffensive odours of a sleepy Canadian suburb. Here, the food is not grown from the ground but arranged neatly in rows, under bright lights with no flies or worms, and in place of sweaty, irritable farmers who swing their scythes at you if you come too close, there are smiling cashiers who wave and tell you to "Have a nice day!"

These places are called "grocery stores" and there is an expensive one and a cheaper one, but they are both owned by the same company to effectively target all potential consumer markets, and to ensure the people who can spend more on their groceries don't have to rub against the dirty elbows of those who can't. We buy our groceries at the cheaper grocery store, and it is in the cereal aisle that Der Vater is struck with the name I am to be called. He sees the box with a cartoon gentleman wearing a crisp, blue naval uniform. The gentleman has a brilliant white moustache, like Guru Nanak, whose portrait is hung in the landing at the top of the stairs at the homestead. And lo and behold, the moustachioed naval officer even holds his right hand up, just like the portrait

of Guru Nanak! Boy, that's a nice name, isn't it? Feels good on the palate, has historical and metaphysical panache, is disarmingly simple at first glance, yet has enough ethnic nuance to slip up that charmless Western tongue. If only the midwife had been there to dissuade Der Vater from pursuing such an inauspicious course of action. But she was not, and as an unfortunate result, it is in the cereal aisle of Mark and Linda's No Frills where Der Vater is so inspired by the cartoon mascot Cap'n Crunch that he decides unilaterally, "Han, mein puth da naam Nanak rakhunga!"[8]

8 Yes, my son will be named Nanak!

THE BLOOD OF FIVE RIVERS

Once upon a time, the world was at peace. *At least, where my grandfather was born, where he grew, and where he lived, there was peace. But elsewhere, a man sat in a room with a pen and a map, and as my grandfather sat in a relative state of tranquility, a line was drawn across that map. So subtle a thing, surely it should have had no consequence. But peace is fragile, and so easily was it torn apart by that line, and so easily was the fabric of my grandfather's reality torn apart with it…*

Kaka, born and raised in a small, rural farming village in the Indian state of Punjab, seizes a unique opportunity to leave India and seek his fortunes abroad. He is soon catapulted into a journey in which he becomes an unwitting witness to some of the most significant historical events in the latter half of the 20th century.

Kaka's second-born and second-generation son, Nanak, charts his father's trajectory through the Middle East, Europe, and finally to North America where he ultimately settles in the place of Nanak's birth—Canada. An intergenerational tale of fathers and sons, migration and integration, and the lasting impacts of legacy.

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