

**BHANU KAPIL /** from **Notes for a novel never written: Ban**

## **Notes Toward a Race Riot Scene:**

In April 1979, I was ten years old.

This is a short essay about vectors. It's about Brueghel's Icarus. It's about a girl walking home from school at the exact moment that her neighbor laces up his Doc Marten's, tight. It's about a partial and irrelevant nudity. It's about the novel as a form that processes the part of a scene that doesn't function as an image, but as the depleted, yet still livid mixture of materials that a race riot is made from. Think of the sky. Think of the clear April day with its cardigans and late afternoon rain shower. Think of the indigo sky lowering over London like a lid. Think of Blair Peach, the anti-racism campaigner and recent emigrant from New Zealand, who will die before this day is out.

Think about a cyborg to get to the immigrant.

Think of a colony. Think of the red and white daikon radishes in a tilted box on the pavement outside Dokal and Sons, on the corner of the Uxbridge Road and Lansbury Drive. Think of the road, which here we call asphalt: there, it is bitty. It is a dark silver with milky oil seams. A patch up job, *Labour* still in power, but not for long. It's 1979, St. George's Day, and the Far Right has decided to have its annual meeting in a council-run meeting hall in Southall, Middlesex, a London suburb in which it would be rare—nauseating—to see a white face.

To see anyone, actually. Everyone's indoors. Everyone can tell what's coming. It's not a riot, at this point, but a simple protest in an outlying area of London, an immigrant suburb: a *banlieue*. We board the glass up, draw the curtains and lie down. Lie down between the hand-sewn quilts shipped from India in a crate then covered in an outer cotton case stitched to the padding with a fine pink thread. The quilts smell of an antiseptic powder, an anti-fungal, Mars. We lie down beneath the blankets in front of the fire. It's 1979, so there's a small gas fire and a waist-high fridge, where we keep our milk and our eggs and our cheese, right there, in the living room. It's 1979, and so I live in Hayes, though in two months, after the riot, we'll sell our house and move.

Move away. As would you.

## Cobra Notes for Ban:

I want a literature that is not made from literature.

A girl walks home in the first minutes of a race riot, before it might even be called that—the sound of breaking glass as equidistant, as happening or coming from the street and from her home.

What loops the ivy-asphalt/glass-girl combinations? Abraded as it goes? I think, too, of the curved, passing sound that has no fixed source. In a literature, what would happen to the girl? She fails to orient, to take another step. I understand. She is collapsing to her knees then to her side in a sovereign position.

Notes for Ban, 2012: a year of sacrifice and rupture, murderous roses blossoming in the gardens of immigrant families with money problems, citizens with a stash: and so on. Eat a petal and die. Die if you have to. See: end-date, serpent-gate. Hole. I myself swivel around and crouch at the slightest unexpected sound.

When she turned her face to the ivy, I saw a cube of bunched-up foil propped between the vines. Posture made a circuit from the ivy to her face. The London street a tiny jungle: dark blue and shimmering a bit, from the gold/brown tights she was wearing beneath her skirt. A girl stops walking and lies down on a street in the opening scene of a riot. Why? At points it rains. In a novel that no one writes or thinks of writing, the rain falls in lines and dots upon her. In the loose genetics of what makes this street real, the freezing cold, vibrating weather sweeping through south-east England at 4 p.m. on an April afternoon is very painful. Sometimes there is a day and sometimes there is a day reduced to its symbolic elements: a cup of broken glass; the Queen's portrait on a thin bronze coin; dosage; rain.

This is why a raindrop indents the concrete with atomic intensity. This is why the dark green, glossy leaves of the ivy are so green: multiple kinds of green: as night falls on the “skirt.” The outskirts of London: *les banlieues*.

## **Ban en Banlieues (suburban):**

A puff of diesel fumes on an orbital road.

The country outside London, with its old parks and labyrinths of rhododendron or azalea,

futile and tropical pinks in a near-constant downpour of green, black and silver rain.

In the forest surrounding London, a light ice falls through the trees.

Like glitter. A snake, aspen-colored, bright yellow with green stripes, slips through the bracken, its pink eyes open and black diamond-shaped irises blinking on then off. In frozen time, ancient beings emerge with the force of reptiles. In the forest, time and weather are so mixed up, a trope of bedtime stories, bottom-up processing, need. I need the snake to stop the news. This is the news: a girl's body is dressed and set: still yet trembling, upon a rise in the forest. There are stars. Now it's night. Time is coming on hard. The snake slips over her leg, her brown ankle. She's wearing shoes, maroon patent leather shoes with a low heel and three slim buckles, but no socks.

Whoever dressed her was in a hurry.

Imagine the scene: a forest outside of London, 10 p.m.

An April snowfall, the ground still coppery, gold. A snake has escaped from time: a suburban aquarium. Volatile, starving, it senses a parallel self, the girl's body emitting a solar heat, absorbed in the course of a lifetime but now discharging, pushing off. Without thought, below thought, it moves towards her through the rusted trees.

## What is Ban?

Ban is a mixture of dog shit and bitumen (ash) scraped off the soles of running shoes: Puma, Reebok, Adidas.

Looping the city, Ban is a warp of smoke.

To summarize, she is the parts of something re-mixed as air: integral, rigid air, circa 1972-1979. She's a girl. A black girl in an era when, in solidarity, Caribbean and Asian Brits self-defined as black. A black (brown) girl encountered in the earliest hour of a race riot, or what will become one by nightfall.

April 23rd, 1979: by morning, anti-Nazi campaigner, Blair Peach, will be dead.

It is, in this sense, a real day: though Ban is unreal. She's both dead and never living: the part, that is, of life that is never given: an existence. What, for example, is born in England, but is never, not even on a cloudy day, English?

Under what conditions is a birth not recognized as a birth?

Answer: Ban.

And from Ban: "banlieues."

(The former hunting grounds of King Henry VIII. Earth-mounds. Oaks split into several parts by a late-century lightning storm.) These suburbs are, in places, leafy and industrial; the Nestle factory spools a milky, lilac effluent into the Grand Union canal that runs between Hayes and Southall. Ban is nine. Ban is seven. Ban is ten. Ban is a girl walking home from school just as a protest starts to escalate. Pausing at the corner of the Uxbridge Road, she hears something: the far-off sound of breaking glass. Is it coming from her home or is it coming from the street's distant clamor? Faced with these two sources of a sound she instinctively links to violence, the potential of violent acts, Ban lies down. She folds to the ground. This is syntax.

Psychotic, fecal, neural, wild: the auto-sacrifice begins, endures the night: never stops: goes on.



As even more time passes, as the image or instinct to form this image desiccates, I prop a mirror, then another, on the ground for Ban.

A cyclical and artificial light falls upon her in turn: pink, gold, amber then pink again. Do the mirrors deflect evil? Perhaps they protect her from a horde of boys with shaved heads or perhaps they illuminate—in strings of weak light—the part of the scene when these boys, finally, arrive.

The left hand covered in a light blue ash. The ash is analgesic, data, soot, though when it rains, Ban becomes leucine, a bulk, a network of dirty lines that channel starlight, presence, boots. Someone walks towards her, for example, then around her, then away.

I want to lie down in the place I am from, where this work is set: on the street I am from.

In the rain. Next to the ivy. As I did, on the border of Pakistan and India: the two Punjabs. Nobody sees someone do this. I want to feel it in my body—the root cause.