'In rural India an unnamed surgeon uncovers old secrets: What do angels look like? Why are tears denied to the dead? Is the afterlife run by bureaucrats? The surgeon's indifference to death is like God's, only more terrifying because it is human. I read this book in a single addictive sitting. It will stay with me for a long time' Jeet Thayil

'Equal parts speculative fiction, medical drama and a philosophical treatise on death … perceptive and absurdly humorous in ways I hadn't expected. By the time I reached its smashing final line, I was hoping Paralkar would resurrect the dead for a sequel' *The Hindu*

'A beautifully fearsome meta-fiction on death, the dead and the living' *Hindu Business Line*

'Delivers one hundred per cent in terms of thrill, drama, atmosphere and eeriness' *Financial Express*

'Part Kafka and part *The Brothers Karamazov* … an unsettling meditation on life and death' *Kirkus*

NIGHT THEATRE

Vikram Paralkar

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London
WC1X 9HD
www.serpentstail.com

First published in India in 2017 as *The Wounds of the Dead* by
Fourth Estate, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Dante by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP record for this book can
be obtained from the British Library

ISBN: 978 1 78816 132 9
eISBN: 978 1 78283 482 3

One

THE DAY THE DEAD visited the surgeon, the air in his clinic was laced with formaldehyde. His pharmacist had poured some into a beaker in the operating room and given it a night to scour every corner. Once the door was opened, the acrid fumes spilled into the corridor and death leached out of the walls. This was the usual death, the mundane kind – that of insects and vermin.

The previous afternoon, a farmer had slit open the forearm of another with a sickle. They rushed up the hillock and crowded into the clinic, five farmers with a red trail behind them, holding the wound shut with a grimy rag.

The surgeon peeled off the cloth and saw the laceration from elbow to wrist.

'How did this happen?'

The injured man snarled through gritted teeth. 'This dog did it.'

Beside him, the accused hung his head. 'I was cutting the grain, Doctor Saheb. I didn't see him bending down to pick up the bundle. Please stitch him up. I'll pay.'

The surgeon pressed the rag back onto the wound. 'It

may not be so easy.' His pharmacist was standing by his side, ready with gloves on her hands. He passed the farmer's forearm over to her and let her lead the man to the operating room. The surgeon followed, stepping over the drops of blood in the man's wake. The other farmers stayed in the corridor. One of them pulled out a pouch of tobacco from his pocket.

'Don't spit on my walls,' warned the surgeon, and closed the door.

The pharmacist laid a drape over the stone slab of the operating table, and the surgeon asked the farmer to sit on a stool and stretch his arm across the cloth. He snapped on a pair of gloves and lifted the rag again. Blood oozed into the gash. The farmer puffed as the surgeon pulled the arm out straight along the length of the table.

The cut was long and irregular but shallow, confined to the skin for most of its length. The sickle had dug a little deeper in one place, but at least it hadn't nicked the artery. The sun was still up. There was enough light. The surgeon painted the skin brown with iodine and poured some into the wound itself, and with a piece of cotton soaked in alcohol, he traced the margin of the torn skin. The alcohol, as always, spread like oil on a lake, leaking into the cut. The farmer, who'd been biting his lip at the iodine, now threw his head back and started cursing someone's mother and sister.

'Enough,' the surgeon said. 'If you want me to do my work, you'll have to be quiet.'

'Saheb, the liquid burns.'

'Yes, I know. But it's necessary. And I'll tell you right now that I have very little numbing medicine – just two vials.

I'll inject some of it here, but I won't be able to numb your whole arm. If you're shouting so much now, god knows what you'll do when it's time for the stitches.'

'I'll be quiet, Saheb.'

'And don't move your arm. Otherwise you can go to some other clinic and find another doctor to sew you up.'

The surgeon injected lidocaine into the edges of the wound and prepared his needle and suture while the numbing took effect. When he began stitching, the farmer bit down into his turban and whimpered, though without another word. And so it went.

Something scurried across the corner of the surgeon's vision. It was a cockroach at the base of the far wall, rustling its wings, curling and waving its antennae as though claiming the clinic for itself. The surgeon wanted to bellow at someone, but the pharmacist had stepped out to hand medicine to an old woman with a porous spine who visited the clinic every week with her unending complaints, and the farmer just sat there with his eyes clenched and his bloody arm extended before him. There was no one at whom the surgeon could holler: Why is there a filthy cockroach in my operating room? Am I supposed to play the exterminator around here as well? Mortar the cracks in the tiles? Pack the walls with poison?

The numbness in his fingers made the surgeon realize how hard he was gripping his forceps. He tried not to pour his anger into the needle and suture, but the more the cockroach scampered, the louder the farmer puffed into his turban. Then, after a stab that the surgeon himself thought regrettably brutal, the farmer gasped and raised his wet eyes.

The surgeon slammed down his instruments and marched to the wall. The roach darted away. The surgeon stamped, but twice, thrice, it dodged him. Then he suspended his leg in the air, waited until the cockroach stopped running around and, when the moment was right, ground it under his heel. The rest of the suturing, he completed without interruption.

Just when he'd started to wonder if the pharmacist had fallen down a well, she returned to help him bandage the forearm. He wrote out a prescription for a tetanus vaccine and a course of antibiotics. The farmers outside the room had all left, except for one, who snapped up from his haunches as soon as the surgeon walked out into the corridor.

'You're the culprit, aren't you?'

'I'm sorry. I swear on my mother I didn't cut him on purpose. I didn't see—'

'Go buy these things from the city pharmacy. There should be a train leaving in fifteen minutes.'

'As you say, Doctor Saheb.' The man bowed and ran off.

The surgeon called the pharmacist, who'd left the operating room after bandaging the man's arm. 'Sterilize my instruments and fumigate the room.'

'Tonight?'

'Yes, tonight.'

'But, Saheb, there'll be children here tomorrow. For the polio drops.'

'Children? What do they have to do with this? There's a dead cockroach in there, and god knows how many live ones hiding in the walls. A cockroach in my operating room. What a disgrace. Only in *this* bloody clinic.'

The pharmacist winced as the door slammed in her face. Perhaps Saheb's back was troubling him again. She peeled away a fleck of rust from the edge of a metal tray and gathered the used instruments and the drape from the operating room on it. Saheb had clearly spent some energy in flattening the cockroach, and it took her some time to scrub its remains off the floor. A line of ants had already started to form, so she swept and mopped the rest of the room as well.

Then she taped shut every gap she could find in the windows, all the cracks in the frames, the spaces around their blunt, rounded corners. From the cabinet under the sink, she pulled out a large beaker and set it in the middle of the room. She poured the formalin halfway up to the black line – the clinic would be unbearable the next day if she filled it all the way. After confirming that she hadn't dropped anything in the room, especially not her mangalsutra, she added a few tablespoons of permanganate to the beaker. The mixture started bubbling, and she hurried out with the roll of tape and sealed the door behind her.

'What about the vaccines?' the surgeon called from his consultation room. 'Have they been delivered?'

'No, not yet, Saheb. They were going to come today.'

'Then what are we supposed to do for the polio drive? Spray the children with rosewater? Worthless, all of them. Some lazy official must have spent the day eating mutton at his aunt's place instead of delivering the cases. If he isn't here by tomorrow morning, I swear I'll file complaints in the head office every week till they fire him.'

He emerged, the newspaper rolled in his hand like a

policeman's club. 'I'm going. If patients come for me and they aren't dying, tell them to return tomorrow.'

'Yes, Saheb.'

A full bladder pulled the surgeon from sleep, and the rattle of the ceiling fan kept him from returning to it. The fan wasn't loud, but it had a maddening rhythm, a monotonous, creaking pulse. He thought about prisoners who'd reportedly lost their sanity after enduring such things – dripping water and the like. Who knew if those tales were even true? At this hour, they sounded plausible.

It was almost exactly three years since he'd come to this place. Three years in these rooms, in the tiny quarters adjoining the clinic. The windows were just as they'd been when he arrived, actually a little worse now, their squares of mosquito netting perforated by the constant pecking of sparrows. And what protection had the netting provided him against that bout of dengue anyway? The illness had come and gone, but it had left a fatigue that still lingered all these months on. He sometimes wondered if the disease hadn't affected his brain as well. When he first moved here, he'd resolved never to let his mind stagnate, no matter how bad things got. He'd brought his library with him, three tall bookcases to surround his bed, his bulwarks against this unlettered village. When was the last time he'd taken a book from the shelves? The tomes were just chunks of yellow paper now, collections of purposeless sentences trailing each other from cover to cover for no good reason.

These menial chores – draining abscesses, treating coughs and diarrhoea, extracting rotten teeth, and now, another

great feat, squashing cockroaches. All for what? To live in this hovel?

He could walk across the room and turn the creaking fan off, but the effort didn't seem worth it. Sleep wouldn't come either way. He cradled the back of his head in his fingers and watched the blades chase each other in grey circles.

At dawn, the pharmacist strapped on a surgical mask and stepped into the eye-watering cloud of formaldehyde engulfing the clinic. She threw open every window, even set out small bowls of ammonia in each of the four rooms, but the fumes wouldn't dissipate. She tried to switch on a fan.

The run back home left her too breathless to get her words out.

'Wake up, wake up. The clinic lights aren't working. The fridge is warming up. Doctor Saheb will be so angry.'

Her husband looked barely conscious as she dragged him up the hillock, but the noxious fog at the top blew the sleep right out of him. She didn't want to torture him like this, but who else in the village knew the clinic's wiring?

'The fuses,' he said. 'Third time this month.'

She let him grumble. With his red eyes, his uncombed hair, and the handkerchief tied across his nose and mouth, he could have been mistaken for a bandit. He pushed a ladder up against the door of the operating room and climbed to the electrical box. When he opened it, even she, from where she stood, could see black moustaches on either side of the fuse beds – remnants of repeated burnings.

'Give me the screwdriver. And that wire.'

She dug in the box. 'Can't you do something to stop it burning again?'

'I'll talk to Saheb about this machine, a "surhjagard", they call it, I think. I've never seen one. It's expensive. And I'll have to change a lot of wiring to make it all go through one line.'

'Don't talk about it today, then. It's going to be a bad day, I know it.'

He unscrewed the wrong connection at first, then tightened it again, then coughed until she was afraid he would fall off the ladder. Every few minutes he leaned down, and she wiped his eyes with the same cloth with which she was wiping her own. Finally, he twisted the last copper wires together, and when he pressed the fuses into place and turned the switch, the lights, the fans, the refrigerator, all began to hum and creak.

As he was putting the ladder away, Saheb walked up the steps. 'What happened? Why are you crying?'

'Not crying, Saheb. Just the fumigation.'

These fumes never seemed to bother Saheb. Maybe it was part of his training all those years ago. That, and the cutting open of corpses, the pharmacist had heard. Doctors were brave people. She would die if she ever had to watch something like that.

Saheb went to his chair. 'Have the vaccines arrived?'

'No, not yet.' She tried to retie the straps on her mask, but it was too large for her face.

'What are those rascals doing? Did anyone call to explain the delay?'

'I tried, but no one picked up the phone.'

'Fine. If that's the way it's going to be, I don't care. It's not my vaccine drive anyway. What do I have to lose?'

Over the next hours, the mothers started arriving. They squatted on the grass at a distance, covered their faces and fanned their children. If it hadn't been for the fumes, they would have crowded into the corridor and piled on the benches in twos and threes. Perhaps it was a blessing they weren't doing that now. Not even a week had passed since the pharmacist's husband had hammered the planks back together.

For the past few days, the tiny television in the village square had been broadcasting the same public service announcement on the Marathi channel – round-faced mothers in saris and burkhas smiling and holding hands while a deep, kind voice said, 'Give your babies a gift. Protect their futures. Just two pink drops.' Then a child's sweet face – one that always made the pharmacist's eyes fill – would appear. She knew what would come next: the shrunken leg, the crutch in the armpit, the sunset. 'Make sure you come,' she'd said to every woman she'd met. 'Early in the morning. Tell everyone.'

Now it seemed that ten villages' worth of mothers had taken her advice. And the vaccines seemed more likely to rain from the sky than be delivered.

She closed the pharmacy window and started rearranging shelves that didn't really need her attention. When the day crept past noon, she avoided the eyes of the complaining crowd as she carried lunch and ice water to the surgeon.

He placed a tablet on his tongue and gulped it down. 'Look, if the man doesn't show up in another half an hour, send the women away. If they start yelling, tell them to

march to the district office and set up a hunger strike there. Just tell them not to bother me. I don't brew vaccines in my kitchen. Understood?'

'Yes, Saheb.'

'And tell them all to be quiet. My head is going to explode. Let me at least have a peaceful meal.'

'Yes, Saheb.'

The surgeon was polishing the last morsels off his plate when the pharmacist's husband knocked.

'He's here.'

The surgeon looked out of the window. A corpulent shape in a faded blue safari jacket was puffing up the hillock. The man had an exuberant moustache and square glasses, and was carrying six large thermocol boxes. The sea of squatting women parted to let him pass.

The surgeon washed his hands and stepped into the corridor, every ounce of his flesh already pickled with contempt. The visitor laid down his load.

'Here are the vaccines.'

'You were supposed to bring these yesterday.'

'I was delayed.'

'That's it? You were delayed? And what about us? Are we beggars, waiting for you to throw us alms?'

The official looked at the women who had hurried into the corridor after him, and who were now tugging at the corners of their saris, veiling their faces against his eyes.

'It's no business of yours why I'm late. I'm here now, am I not?'

'Not a shred of responsibility. Is this what you're paid to

do? Every other day is a vacation for you people. Who gives a damn about the doctor? For all you care, he can get holy water from the Ganga and drip it down his villagers' throats.'

'Don't raise your voice, Saheb. I'm not some peon.'

'You think I'm scared of you?'

'I've been placed in charge of this village, this clinic. I'm your supervisor. You don't want to get into trouble with me.'

'Really? What kind of trouble?'

The official rubbed his moustache and then inspected his fingers as if afraid he'd find them stained with dye. 'I didn't want to bring this up here, in front of all these people, but there have been irregularities reported in this clinic. Questions about how your money is spent.'

The surgeon packed as much derision as he could into his laugh. 'You mean the money that doesn't even *reach* us? The money that turns to smoke the moment you and your comrades touch it?'

'Saheb, look, you have vaccines to give out. Why are you wasting time with this kind of talk?'

'Don't teach me how to do my work. I would have been dispensing them since eight if you hadn't been so lazy. But now that you've brought up irregularities, let's talk about irregularities. Just wait. I'll make sure you learn every financial detail about this clinic.'

He gripped the official's arm, digging his thumb and fingers deep into the man's biceps. The man's eyes widened. The surgeon strode into the consultation room, dragging the official in with him, and then released him with enough force to make him fall into a chair. The glass door of the wall cabinet gave a piercing rasp as the surgeon slid it aside, and

he yanked out his tattered moss-green ledger and slammed it on the desk.

'Here's my account book. Pay particular attention to this section, page fifty-two onwards, where I've listed the amounts I've had to spend from my own pocket to keep this place from turning into an archaeological ruin. *That's* an irregularity worth noting, isn't it?'

The official sat as if every part of him, down to his fingers, were welded to the chair.

'I've been working here without a nurse. I've asked the head office to budget me one, to issue advertisements in the district newspaper, but no, my application's been pending in your office for months. I need a new autoclave machine – the old pressure drum we have could blow up in our faces any minute. I need an EKG machine, a suction unit for the operating room … No one can run a clinic like this. A morgue perhaps, not a clinic. Every month I have to spend my own salary to keep this place together. I buy antibiotics and sutures. And kerosene for the generator. I know how much money is assigned to this clinic in the government budget, but you middlemen eat it up, you fat pigs. Sit here, sit with this ledger. Conduct your investigation. Prepare a detailed report for your superiors. I'll wait.'

The look on the official's jowly face was the most satisfying thing the surgeon had seen in months. As if he were thawing himself out of a block of ice, the man started tapping his fingers and making grinding sounds with his teeth. A woman in the crowd behind him giggled. The official scowled, pulled a small booklet out of his pocket and compared some scribblings in it to the numbers in the

ledger. A few times he made as if to write something, but his pen never actually touched paper. Finally, the formaldehyde seemed to get the best of him, and he pressed a handkerchief to his nose.

'I'll need to look around the clinic.'

'Look all you want. It's just four rooms, so take as long as you need. Do you require a magnifying glass?'

The official turned and went into the corridor. The women moved aside as they might have for a serpent.

The surgeon snorted. This one was a novice. The experts among his kind knew how to play their hands with more skill. They knew how to sniff out the naïvely dishonest; erode confidence with pointed observations, ominous frowns, knowing *hmm*s and *tsk*s; apply the slow, escalated pressure that they'd all learnt from their bastard supervisors, who'd learnt it from the endless hierarchy of bastard supervisors above them. Once the prey was cowed enough to reveal some slight indiscretion, some minor misuse of government funds for personal gain, the bastard's work was done. He could then put his feet up and recite his lines: 'Never mind, never mind, everyone makes mistakes. A single mistake doesn't make you a bad person. Of course the government is very strict about its rules. It has a responsibility to the public. But I would never wish your reputation to be soiled. Perhaps we can reach an arrangement. Seal everything within these four walls.'

The seas would boil before he'd tolerate such nonsense in his clinic.

While the surgeon was unpacking boxes and arranging vaccines in the refrigerator, someone pointed at the window.

He looked up to see the official worming his way out through the crowd. The surgeon cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, 'Next time forget the vaccines. Just bring us some water from the Ganga.'

The safari jacket receded at a faster pace.

If only the day could have ended there. But now there were these women. The hillock was crawling with their offspring.

The pharmacist's husband stood in the corridor like a traffic guard, organizing the crowd into queues, directing them either to the surgeon or the pharmacist.

The surgeon squeezed two pink drops onto an infant's tongue. It coughed and burst into a wail, the vaccine bubbling on its lips in pink spittle, and its mother gathered it up on her shoulder and patted it.

'Done. Next.'

'Thank you, Doctor Saheb. Your blessings on my daughter.'

'Come on, come on. Next. What am I, a priest? There are other people waiting.'

The young mother, barely more than a girl herself, was replaced by another who could well have been her twin, for all he knew. This one had a three-year-old in a shabby brown tunic. He was rubbing his eyes and mewling.

'My eyes hurt.'

'I know, I know.' She was trying to hold him steady. 'Just take this medicine and we'll go.'

'But it's burning. My eyes are burning.'

'Saheb is waiting, my child.' She tried to pry the little mouth open, but the boy squirmed, twisted his head this way and that.

The surgeon clenched his jaw. Who did they think they were? They could take the vaccine or get out, it was nothing to him either way. What did they know of his qualifications? Of his skills? He was glad the fumes were burning their eyes, the eyes of their brats too, so they could know that he was a surgeon and not some village quack. He hoped their eyes would burn all the more with that knowledge.

He said little else as the chain of mothers and children trickled through the clinic. The afternoon passed, and the assembly on the hillock thinned.

After the last of them had left, and the formaldehyde had wrung out all the tears it could and drifted away, the surgeon sank into his chair. The sun was a bag of blood sliced open by the horizon, smearing the squat brick houses. The parched ground stretched before him, covered with a rash of dry yellow weed.

Every speck of this village seemed created to crush the life out of him. He felt an intense hatred for it all – the dust that lay heavy on the earth, the bone-white trees clawing with ludicrous ambition at the sky, even the mongrels that limped from door to door for scraps of meat. If it could all vanish, the world would only be enriched.

He faced the window and ran his fingers through his hair – what little was left of it – as the sun extinguished itself on the huts in the distance and darkness dripped like pitch over the dreary village. 'No more.' He yawned. 'No more.' From this day on, not a paisa of his own money would be spent on this place. Whatever savings he had, he would gather them and leave. Two months at the most while he arranged for a

house somewhere. Anywhere. The official could take this bloody clinic and turn it into a tomb.