

P O L A R
V O R T E X

a novel



S H A N I
M O O T O O

Scotiabank Giller Prize-nominated author of
CEREUS BLOOMS AT NIGHT *and* VALMIKI'S DAUGHTER

PRAISE FOR POLAR VORTEX

“The past isn’t even past—and the present is tense with conflicting desires and untold stories. What brings clarity to this setting is Shani Mootoo’s limpid prose, clean and bracing. *Polar Vortex* is an honest, but also moving, exploration of true intimacy.”

—Amitava Kumar, author of *Immigrant, Montana*

“How to know the shifting pieces of ourselves, how to acknowledge contradictory desires, as we are pulled into the maelstrom of desire and memory? Shani Mootoo’s intimate new novel suspends us in the vortex between acts of betrayal and acts of love. It is a powerfully unsettling work from a brilliant artist.”

—Madeleine Thien, Scotiabank Giller Prize-winning author of *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*

“What a gorgeous and thrilling novel. Beautifully crafted, with perfect form and icy-clear tone—Shani Mootoo held me under her spell until the shock and release of the last page!”

—Sarah Selecky, author of *Radiant Shimmering Light*

“Shani Mootoo’s *Polar Vortex* is a powerful, fraught, and inventive exploration of the impossibility of ever really knowing the people we come to love. Told in urgent, incandescent prose and effortlessly spinning in and out of time, the book is an intimate and starkly honest examination of the complexities of sexual identity, lust, shame, regret, and how we, no matter where we come from or how we identify, are at our most complicated when it comes to the whims and failings of the human heart.”
—Joe Meno, author of *Marvel and a Wonder*

PRAISE FOR SHANI MOOTOO

“Mootoo has an impeccable ear . . . authentic and powerful.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

“A writer with a generous spirit and a gift for storytelling.”

—*The Globe and Mail*

“*Cereus Blooms at Night* is a story of magical power.”

—Alice Munro

“Mootoo writes of death and loss with an equally heartbreaking poignancy . . . an intensely moving story.”

—*Winnipeg Free Press*

“Mootoo’s prose is vivid, poetic and passionate. . . . This is a writer who knows how to satisfy the reader.”

—*NOW Magazine* (NNNN)

“Mootoo’s sense of narrative verges on genius.”

—*Edmonton Journal*

“A masterful storyteller.”

—*The Washington Post*

“A novel for both brain and heart:
at once wise and smouldering.”

—*Camilla Gibb*

“*Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab* has a fascinating premise, one that emboldens Mootoo’s ongoing literary project of giving voice to sexual minorities with brown faces from hot countries. They are stories that can no longer be silenced.”

—*The Globe and Mail*

“Shani Mootoo’s multilayered new novel explores storytelling and traces powerful transitions between cultures and genders. It encompasses identity, dislocation, and storytelling’s capacity to navigate grief and lapsed time.”

—*Georgia Straight*

“Shani Mootoo can be counted as
one of our most gifted new writers.”

—*Vancouver Sun*

“Dazzling...Mootoo creates a dense Asian-Caribbean world of buried secrets and desperate memories, a hothouse in which stories grow as lushly as flowers.”

—*Books in Canada*

“The passion of the characters, their insistence to live, to find joy despite the tyranny under which they conduct their lives, makes *Cereus Blooms at Night* remarkable.”

—Shyam Selvadurai, author of *Funny Boy*

“Working with magic, grounded by psychological insight, Mootoo weaves a deft design of vivid and sensuous scenes.”

—*Quill & Quire*

“This ethereal first novel employs myth and magic reminiscent of Isabel Allende.”

—*Out Magazine*

“Reading *Cereus Blooms at Night* is like reading a dream, entering a strange but believable world in which unusual possibilities flower like the cereus itself: evocative, pervasive, sensuous.”

—*Books in Canada*

“Highly charged and downright explosive. Mootoo’s description of sexual awakening is one of the most poignant I’ve run across.”

—*Xtra*

POLAR
VORTEX

SHANI MOOTOO

Book*hug Press

TORONTO

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For:
Jane
Shelagh
Pam
Deborah

I

THE BED

. . .

a cream-coloured kurta, the neck and cuffs of the long silk shirt trimmed in gold thread. a red dhoti. a cream-and-red turban edged in gold, from which a long curtain of pearl-like beads hangs and covers his face. around him red draperies—a ceremonial canopy. behind the canopy, walls decorated in red fabric. my eyes are lowered, focused on his cream silk slipper shoes curled at the toes. he is standing on red flowers strewn on the red carpet. people hover about, their backs to us. they are busy-busy, organizing his life, but they don't pay him, or us, attention. there is a low table inside the canopy. no, not a table, a bed. he takes my hand. we move toward the bed and lower ourselves onto it. we lie side by side, his arm across my chest. i worry people will see us like this. i want him to lie on me. i am thrusting. thrusting my body. i plead, i want him. he is holding his penis, i take hold of it, can hardly breathe, my chest aches for the release of. no, not love, sex.

everything is red. his tongue. his penis. the palms of my hands. red red red.

someone draws back the hanging cloth of the canopy, i pull away just in time and get up off the bed. drums are beaten with fury, cymbals clash, tremble, and chatter, a rhythm red and violent draws near. his soon-to-be-wife approaches, mummy-like, shrouded in flowing red and gold, marigold heads scattered ahead of her steps. i leave through a side door, looking behind me. he remains reclined, no evidence in sight of interrupted pleasure.

. . .

That dream again. In it I always want him so badly. I am shaking from my waist down, like a dog yanked off a human's leg.

I wonder if I moved about in my sleep. If Alex has any idea of the kind of dream I had lying next to her. She's already left the bed. And she's closed the door—that was considerate. She is able to navigate the house soundlessly. How does she do it? Whenever I try to shut that door quietly, the hinges squeak, the handle squawks, the lock hits the jamb loudly.

I must get out of bed. It's 7:56 a.m., much too late to put a stop to him visiting us. I have no choice now but to face him.

But he'll be facing me, too. I'm not the only culprit here. I must remember that. Odd that I'd sleep in on this of all days. But not so odd, I suppose, that I'd have dreamt of him. But this, of all dreams.

It's so quiet with the door closed. Funny, you can't hear a thing from the rest of the house, but you can hear a dog out on the street barking and, from outside the window behind the bed, a bird—at least, I think it's a bird—scurrying along the metal eavestrough. Could be a squirrel. A chipmunk maybe. Or a mouse trying to get in from the cold. We're supposed to be fine with that, supposed to expect that sort of thing living in an old farmhouse on what is technically an island. I doubt I'll ever get used to critters wanting to share space with me.

The desire I felt in the dream lingers in my body. Ripples of pleasure torture me. I'll think of Alex. I'll curl under the covers here for just a few minutes more and imagine her.

But a feeling of regret descends on me, and I take my hands from beneath the covers and pull the top sheet taut up to my chin. I wonder what she's doing. We hadn't ended the night well. Yes, that's right. There'd been all that tension. I wonder how she is this morning.

We'd come to bed, both of us, with heavy hearts. The silence between us crouched on my chest like a small animal breathing in my face. After a while, my e-book held like a wall, I wondered if I should turn and hug her, perhaps say something kind. Instead, I closed the book, and she, closing hers, too, reached up and turned off her bedside lamp. When I heard her gentle sleep-breathing, I relaxed. But for a good while I couldn't sleep. Then, just as I was finally drifting off, her perfectly aware voice ripped apart the veil.

"Was there ever anything between you? Is there anything you should tell me?"

I jolted wide awake. If playful jealousies had been part of our little games of arousal, it was too late—in the night, and in the trajectory that has led us to today—to expect this as a motive for her question. Should I answer with a clearly irritated voice, I wondered, or should I respond kindly? Should I take on a tone of indignation and ask what might she possibly be insinuating by "anything" and by "between"?

"Are you awake?" she persisted.

The pull toward sleep had disarmed me. I was too tired to properly gear myself up for a discussion that could easily

deteriorate into argument. “I am now,” I said, biding my time. I stared tensely into the blackened room. Another tactic was necessary. “The only thing you need to know about Prakash,” I capitulated, my voice low to emphasize I’d been well on my way to sleep, “is that he’s loyal. Very loyal. He doesn’t drop his friends easily.”

She did not respond. This woke me further, and I felt pressured to continue. I added that while I wasn’t surprised he’d gotten in touch, I also wasn’t worried it meant the beginning of anything—for instance, a connection we’d be obliged to carry on. Again she didn’t respond. Fully awake, deciding on kindness, I softened and offered more: that was Prakash, I said—here today, gone tomorrow. Still nothing from her. If she’d picked up on my feeble attempt and the careless contradictions in it to reassure her, she didn’t let on. I knew she hadn’t just suddenly fallen asleep. She wanted me to speak. So even as I felt worn-out so late at night, and was struggling for the right words, I acquiesced and added gently, “You’ve been so—suspicious is not the word, nor skeptical, but so—so something regarding him, Alex. As if it’s unthinkable that I could have an old friend who’d want to visit me. Am I that unlovable?”

From her came finally a response, and it was one that relaxed me, a soft and breathy cluster of a chortle. I turned on my side and put my arm across her. She drew it tighter, as if it were a seat belt, and grasped my hand. We lay like that for some minutes, and at last, feeling relieved, I closed my eyes. Then, just as I felt again the tug of sleep, her voice, as alert as if we were in the midst of a daytime chat, startled me: “You know, five years ago, when we came here to live, we left so much behind.”

What was she getting at, I wondered. I was tempted to beg, *Do you seriously want, at this time of the night, to talk about our move here?* But gratitude for what I imagined was a switch from our previous contentious topic held me back. I gave her hand a light squeeze by way of acknowledging I'd heard her.

"I mean, we're not the same people anymore," she continued.

"Aren't you tired, Alex?" I asked.

"I'm just thinking that one can't really hold on to the past. Not if you want to move forward. We all eventually relieve ourselves of things and people no longer in our lives."

I pulled my hand from hers. Despite the heat beginning to flush my face, I made sure to keep my voice even, and asked, "So what are you saying?"

"Well, just that if we're not in touch with someone for several years, perhaps it's not a friendship worth holding on to, even if it had once been. I mean, you'll find out, won't you? But perhaps these things just take time, and letting go happens naturally. On its own."

I had to bite my lip to prevent my baser self from flaring up and announcing that Prakash was not simply any old friend, and that the history he and I shared—his part in it, my part in it—was more than reason enough for him to want to pay me a visit. But this was approaching truths and subjects I couldn't afford to unbridle.

. . .

That's why I overslept—I'd been awake most of the night stewing about Alex's assumptions and worries, and my own foolishness. Oh, man. If only I could step back in time, I'd undo this mess. Why on earth did I invite him here? Into my home. My sanctuary. Our home, Alex's and mine. But one can also ask: why did he, in the first place, contact me? It should have been clear, at least this time, that I'd meant to cut ties with him. I guess that's what happens when you simply hope people intuit what you're intending. But I couldn't have told him directly, explicitly, to bugger off and leave me alone. Of course I couldn't.

Alex has been testy ever since she learned of his visit. She knows nothing of my connection to Prakash, really, so why this fractiousness? Her discontent about his coming here has been less than playful. It amounts to insinuations, if not accusations, of a dalliance—past or present, who knows what's in her mind?—and, whether or not she's aware of it, casts aspersions on my sexuality.

It's all really unfortunate, and her manner makes me feel guilty. Doubly guilty, in fact. For asking him here, to the home I share with her, *and* for cutting him out of my life.

Alex's unease, given what she knows—and does not know—is unusual and extreme. I ask if something else is bothering her, but it's always that uninviting two-word answer she delivers: "The book." Or: "My work." One and the same, really. Or she just stares at me blankly, unnervingly.

And when Prakash gets here, what will I say to him about why I so obviously tried to snip him out of the picture?

If he is to arrive right at noon, then he's probably just getting in his car for the three-hour drive, if you count rest stops on the highway and all, before he even crosses the bridge onto the island. He doesn't drink coffee. We have black tea in a tin somewhere. It's old, but he didn't used to be fussy. I wonder what he's like today.

. . .

Alex has an unfathomable memory for even the most inconsequential of details. What was it she asked when I told her my friend Prakash had gotten in touch? *The Ugandan guy you met in university?* Something like that. I'd mentioned him briefly, one time, and that was a couple days after she and I first met. One time, that was all, six years ago, and yet she remembered.

We were sitting on the couch, with Elliot, good dog that he was, possessively and conveniently sprawled across a good half of the seat, and Alex and I were obliged to sit against each other at one end. A throw pillow was wedged between her and me. I remember my mind fixed on the small pillow, and how the act of removing it seemed too much of an announcement. We've joked about that since. It turns out that she, too, was focused on removing it but sensed my hesitation and didn't want to "scare" me off.

We were flipping through a photo album she'd pulled off one of my bookshelves. I had one arm on the back of the couch behind her, my body angled toward her, Elliot pressed against me and snoring. I can still feel on the tips of my fingers the slight contact they made with the fine stray wool fibres of her sweater. We came to a group photo of my university table-tennis league teams, about twelve of us. Fiona, my "roommate" at the time (we didn't know others like us; hard to imagine nowadays, but it was true back then), and I were pressed against each other. She and I had relished the idea that, despite facing a camera,

the private heat and intensity between us would be known only to us, yet immortalized for all time. This was our secret. Our friend Prakash stood on the other side of me, smiling broadly, giving the photographer his trademark V sign, his two fingers curled just enough to assure that his peace was benign, not militant.

“You look so young. You look like a young boy. How old were you?” Alex asked. This pleased me. The photo was taken in our fourth and final year, I told her. I was twenty-two or so. Alex didn’t pay Prakash any attention, but she honed right in on Fiona. “The woman next to you. Who is she?” she asked, her forefinger tracing the seam that joined Fiona and me. I was impressed and, at the same time, made shy by the obvious perceptiveness in the question. There was expectation in her tone. I laughed guiltily and, nevertheless, asked why she was asking. She said I was between two people, a man and a woman, and the woman and I seemed to be leaning into each other. Of course, once she said this, I, too, saw how obvious, how intentional-seeming, such closeness was, and I saw for the first time the looks on our faces. I became in that instant a stranger looking at a found photograph and saw the half-smile and deviousness, a kind of fear and daring at once. And I saw how naive we were, how reckless, in posing so intimately, but more importantly I thought Alex was disarmingly perceptive.

And, Alex continued, it would not have occurred to her that I would have been involved with the man.

Alex and I hadn’t yet slept together, but the air in my little living room had become so electric I knew I wasn’t the only one with it on the brain. I found myself telling Alex that Fiona and I had met in a first-year class and decided to rent an apartment

together, that within days of doing so we became lovers, my first time, her first and only—at least at that time—with a woman. We remained lovers throughout our university years, I said, the wistfulness in my voice hopefully pointing to the unforgotten sensations of first-time love.

“First time?” asked Alex.

“Every time,” I remember responding, grinning.

She twisted her lips and smiled at the same time, and said, “Come on. You must have been in your late teens, early twenties? Was she the first person?”

I was too shy to simply tell her yes, Fiona was indeed the first. I quickly explained that when I was growing up on my little island in the Caribbean, women from families like mine remained girls in their family’s care until they were married, regardless of their age. You were so sheltered, so watched in my kind of family—an Indian family—that unless you were wayward or just stupidly brave, you didn’t get to flirt or experience sexual intimacy with another person until you were married, or, if it was in the cards for you, you left home and went to another country where, in the case of people from families like mine, you attended university—which allowed you more freedom than you’d ever imagined possible. And what do you do with freedom like that? You learn to kiss and you learn to fuck. You learn what’s possible, you experiment, and you figure out in the dorms or in your little bachelor apartment off campus what you like to do and to whom, and what you like to have done to you, and by whom, who you are in bed, who you can and can’t be. All of that, a vital part of your university education abroad. I laughed coyly when I said this. She didn’t think it funny. She nodded soberly. When you went back home, I con-

tinued, you went back a different person, with more than one degree under your belt. Still, she wasn't amused. If you weren't so stupid as to marry while you were away, despite the paper degree you had to show off when you returned home, they'd still call you a girl, and you wouldn't be considered a woman until you married—but what a girl you'd become! She smiled.

So, yes, first time, first person. And it was magic—frighteningly magical, I repeated in a quiet, pensive voice. Alex had angled her body slightly to face me. “You?” I asked.

“Elementary school, in Montreal.” The throw pillow was definitely an intrusion. “There was a girl, from a very rich and powerful family. She instructed us to touch her and each other. I think about that now,” Alex told me, “and I have to wonder how she knew.”

I feigned a nervous chuckle and said, “But you don't really count that, do you?”

“So the real first time, then,” she answered, “was when I was fifteen. A boy, my age, from my high school. We did it on a couch in the basement of his parents' home.”

There *we* were on a couch, and I stopped myself from the tempting crudeness of drawing a parallel. Alex examined the photograph more carefully, and I imagined she was trying to picture Fiona and me, our mouths pressed together, tongues touching, the heat of our bodies against one another. As I was whipping up something between Alex and me, I was aware that we were being stared at by a broadly grinning Prakash waving his weak V-shaped fingers. I decided not to mention anything about him, but elaborated that it was with Fiona I'd experienced that first-time sensation of ascending, ascending, and ascending yet further, and then, that sudden dive-bombing

feeling, your body shattering into a trillion shards of twinkling, long-dying light.

In a whisper, Alex asked if I'd remained friends with Fiona, or with any of the other team members, and although I didn't want to get into a conversation about Prakash, I said, "Him," landing my forefinger on his face, and, for some reason, unable to leave it at that, as if it were the most important thing about him, I answered that he was our friend, a refugee from Idi Amin's Uganda.

"You're still friends? What's his name?" she asked.

"Sort of. Prakash," I said, and she left it there.

I didn't tell her that in the last months of our university years, Fiona had begun to have an affair. With a man. A student named Stan. Had I embarked on this story, I might have told her then that it was the man in the photo who'd helped me through that wretched period and many others, but I did not want to derail the moment with tales of woe and disappointments.

. . .

Yes, Fiona, Prakash, and me, this odd threesome, as he liked to joke about us. We were, for a while, a team. But despite what she and I thought of as a definable intensity in our closeness, he seemed oblivious, and there was never a reason to explicitly explain ourselves. When the relationship ended because of her involvement with Stan, Fiona spent very little time in our apartment. Those were dark days for me, days I felt I could die. The phone would ring, and I'd listen as a message was being left on the answering machine, hoping it was Fiona. But, broken-hearted and desolate if it was anyone else, including Prakash, I couldn't bring myself to pick up the phone.

One afternoon, an insistent knocking on the door tore me from sleep. "I know you're in there. Please open, Priya," he pleaded. He wouldn't leave. I had no choice but to let him in. He leaned against the shut door and looked at me still in my pyjamas. "What's happening to you?" he asked, his brows creased with concern. "I phoned yesterday from the booth outside. I could see you moving about, but you wouldn't pick up the phone. Were you sleeping? Are you ill?" He bypassed me and walked to the kitchen, where he put the kettle on. He stayed until late into the evening, me lying on the couch as if I had the flu, my feet in his lap, neither of us speaking much. He ordered a pizza over the phone and had it delivered. I nibbled the pointed end of a single wedge, more to satisfy him than any hunger. To get him to leave, I had to promise that I'd eat more

of the remaining pizza, and that I'd get up the following morning and attend classes, which I'd been missing.

He knew by then that Fiona was spending time elsewhere, but since nothing more had ever been explained to him, he put down my sudden depression to a natural kind of loneliness, to not having family nearby, or a good substitute for family, which he said Fiona had once been to me. It was he, then, who, more than a few times, came around and comforted me as I cried, he who encouraged me to get out of bed and out of the apartment. He who came and prepared meals for me and tried to get me to eat. It was as if he had decided to be the family he thought I needed. He seemed to want nothing in return, and I began to look forward to his visits. Throughout this time I never even hinted to him about Fiona and me.

. . .

I'm certain it wouldn't have been wise to have told Alex during these last days that yes, he had at one time, but only briefly, been interested. She knows little about the years that immediately followed my emigration to Canada once my university tenure had been completed. There's just never been any reason to get into the details with her of those early days in this country.

I'd found lodging in city-subsidized housing in Toronto. Prakash and I had not lost touch but we weren't as close as before. I had embarked on a practice of artmaking as diligently as anyone pursuing any other kind of career but was, of course, making no money at it, always running out of paint and canvas, and often couldn't pay the bills. My kitchen cupboards tended to be empty, save for cans of ravioli and packages of ramen. Prakash arrived at my apartment one day, unannounced, just after I'd hung up from a phone call with a family member back home who responded to my appeals for financial help—perhaps one too many—advising that I get an ordinary job like normal people, or return at once and marry a man who could take care of me while I pursued my “hobby,” as they called it.

Seeing the state I was in, Prakash held my face in his hands and whispered earnestly, “Your greatness as an artist is being heralded in this very moment. Others can't see it, but I can. Do you trust me? Let me help you. We can do this together.” I was curious, and my protests were weak, and he easily brushed

them away as he carried on with his mission. He tore a sheet of paper from the drawing pad on my dining table, pulled a pen from his shirt pocket, and, handing it to me, directed me to itemize the sums of my rent, utilities, groceries, paints, canvas, and everything else I needed to see me through a month's living. Then he asked me to write down my income. I drew an egg and, while I shaded it in, crosshatching with his blue ink pen, he went to one of the several stacks of paintings leaning against a wall and flipped through it. He pulled out a small canvas board on which I'd made a study in oil of two green glass bottles and a clear one on a tabletop in front of a window through which blue skies topped an emerald-green field. He didn't ask, but announced he was taking it in exchange for the sum of that month's needs, which, he said, would one day—probably after I'd died, he added, laughing—be seen to have been a bargain. That was the first painting I ever sold, and I made it through that month.

After that, I sort of fell, little by little, into him for comfort and support. Yes, there were moments over the course of our continuing friendship he acted as if I were his girlfriend, and although I didn't exactly push him away, I didn't cave either. If I'd long ago told Alex any of this, surely she'd have understood the predicament I had often found myself in as an artist trying to make a go of it on so many fronts and all on my own. Surely she'd have sympathized and seen that I couldn't, after all, have made it in this country entirely alone. Or perhaps she'd have seen something more sinister.

The point is, I hadn't let her in on any of this, and to do so now would be nothing short of foolish.

. . .

It's true, there were times I did feel something for him—love, you could say. But this word *love*, it is a lightning rod that seems, especially in this instance, to have only one meaning. It is so much less nuanced than it should be. I did love him, how could I not have? It is true he had stronger feelings toward me, but mine for him were only ever sisterly.

Well, I suppose one could say my actions were not *always* sisterly. In a situation such as he and I were in, both for the first time in our lives away from home and trying to make it on our own, it surely isn't unreasonable that I would have wondered whether or not my feelings for him were this romantic love I could see he felt for me. There were times, naturally, I had to try and see. For me those times were clarifying, but I guess for him they were confusing.

Alex tells people it was my confidence, my unwavering sense of self, that attracted her to me. In the early days I'd tell her it was nothing but well-practised posturing. Calm on the surface but paddling like hell beneath, I'd say, laughing. But she'd think I was being modest and this, too, she found attractive. And today, if I reveal that this man was so very much a part of my life, what would she think? Discretions and half-truths were par for the course in those early days when she and I were courting each other. But how would they be perceived now?

With her I indulged in the fantasy of having always been fierce enough to stand firm against the norms of society and

expectations of family. She liked this. And so I went along with the uncontested assumption that I'd never actually been interested in being with a man. I can't, therefore, admit to her there were times I played the Indian woman to Prakash's Indian man.

If I did reveal any of this to Alex, it would never be the same between us. I can't risk that. We've built a comfortable life together. I don't want to up-end it.

But I'm risking something, aren't I, by hosting him here?