

## Harbart

**Nabarun Bhattacharya**

**Sunandini Banerjee, Translator**

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Nabarun Bhattacharya's *Harbart* is a wild ride—a short novel that documents the unexpected rise and precipitous fall of Harbart's fortunes in vibrant, humorous prose.

The novel opens with a scene of debauchery that is followed by Harbart's death, and then moves back in time to tell his life story. Orphaned as a baby in Calcutta, he depends on his extended family to care for him though, except for one aunt, they have no interest in doing so. When, at twenty, he seems able to speak with the dead, he happily takes financial advantage of his newfound "talent," posting a sign outside of his bedroom window to welcome customers who wish to speak to their departed loved ones. People come streaming in, but Harbart's luck does not hold.

The story is not the book's main source of pleasure. Harbart's fate is known from the beginning, although the ending does have some surprises in store. Instead, the work's main appeal comes because Bhattacharya's writing is so energetic. Descriptions are fresh, and conversations are lively and often bawdy. Fragments result in a fast pace, and the narrative is full of sudden shifts that plunge into new times and places without explanation, gradually offering orienting details. This frenetic pace is slowed only by quotations from Harbart's favorite books; they open each chapter.

A rich range of tones veers from tragic to humorous, sincere to satirical, these shifts accomplished with ease. The text is gritty with the realism of dirty city streets, drunken revelries, and political violence, but also contains elements of fantasy, as when a fairy appears to keep a benevolent eye on Harbart.

Short but triumphant in its ability to bring comedy, tragedy, and satire together, *Harbart* is a moving, entertaining tale about a man's ill-fated life.

REBECCA HUSSEY (July/August 2019)

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