Class of 66

Rasik Bhadresa
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M P Shah Central High School, Thika
Esse Quam Videri – to be rather than to seem to be
This poem is dedicated to all those
who I had the pleasure of getting to know
during my time at the high school
in Thika, 1963-66
Acknowledgements

In June 2013, our Class of 66 of M P Shah Central High School, Thika had a reunion. For this occasion, I was asked to write a poem to commemorate our time together from January 1963 to December 1966. The poem was first read out at this reunion which took place at Rani’s in Finchley which had attracted almost 50 ex-students and their partners.

I would like to thank my classmates, Anil Patel, Chandrakant Shah, Abdul Yusuf and Bachittar Singh for their encouragement and their help with remembering faces and names of classmates and staff at the school during the time we were there.

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Class of 66
All stars
After all, we survived our four years
Of schoolwork and tasks
Pressures of growing up
Agonies of love
Of trial and error
But also of experience
Most of us stayed the course
One or two departed early
For this reason or that
Disappeared who knows to what unknown?
And one or two arrived a little late
But we all left our footprints
Memories of interactions
Of each other, our teachers
Our associations with our surroundings
None to be forgotten in a hurry
Fond memories carefully deposited
Maturing with the passage of time

In Thika
One degree south of the equator
Four thousand eight hundred ninety seven
Feet above sea level
With year round sunshine
And a pleasant day average of 25°Centigrade
Famous for its vibrant red-flowered flame trees
Sharp and stout sword-leaved sisals
Fragrant pineapples growing on tough rosettes
Deep-red double-seeded coffee beans
The water-falls' of the Thika and the Chania
Tarzan country
And not far off
The fourteen falls spectacle of the Athi
Was located our cherished school
It stood on Thika's quieter western front
And in walking distance for most of us
Chania Falls, Thika
Equally at home to the dayers
From across the town
And the boarders
The hostelites as they were called
From all over the Central Province
Embu, Fort Hall, Juja, Karatina, Kiambu,
Meru, Nanyuki, Nyeri, Naro Moru, Ruiru,
Sagana and even as far as Isiolo
A melting pot
A cultural fusion
A social synthesis
Indeed that was the best part of it
Producing a rich civilising climate
Here we were all equal
With so much watery movement
Of the fast-flowing rivers around us
No wonder Thika was bustling with energy
And only 26 miles from the capital
An easy distance along Kenyatta Highway
Perfectly placed for its many industries
Thika had already in the sixties earned the titles
Growing Little Manchester and
Kenya’s Little Birmingham
There was a fruit canners
A metal box plant
A textile mill, a tannery
A rice mill, a ball-point factory, a spinning mill
And do you remember the labels
Steamship, Tembo and Tanganyika?
Well, they were on safety matches made in Thika
Then Thika also had the only paper mill in East Africa
But let us not forget the forerunner of them all
The renowned Kenya Tanning Extract company
The factory that helped to build a township
Converting wattle bark into tanning agents
Exported as the Rhino Brand
To no less than 25 countries
This was Thika’s first ever factory
Established in 1934 by no other
Than Meghjibhai Pethrajbhai Shah
The esteemed benefactor of our school
To which was given his name
The M P Shah Central High School
M P Shah 1964
So you see my fellow compatriots
We were not in any ordinary place
But in a space buzzing like the inside of a bee hive
There was creativity all around us
Enterprise and back-breaking hard work
With many of our parents
Directly or indirectly involved in this endeavour
So don't be surprised friends
If we got a sprinkling of this energy
Which allowed us to fathom the deep love
Between Romeo and Juliet
That of Layla and her Majnun
And to act it out with just as much conviction
Venture to write *Escape from Sudan*
Giving our utmost to school shows
The Virginia reel across the stage
Singing our hearts out for friendship
*Chahunga mein tujhe sahnge savere*
Debating politics of dictators and communists
And to the liking of Mr Tarlock Singh
Making algebra a favourite subject
Playing hockey to win
Running races to break records
Breast-stroking 50 lengths every Saturday
Just for the sake of it
Sky was the limit and
To be rather than to seem to be
*Esse quam videri* the motto
Fate, our birth dates
Within a few months of each other
Had brought us together
To interact and spend time together
New faces, boys and girls
All so shy at first
No one wanted to look stupid
So we kept quiet
But slowly with the passing of time
Came recognition, an understanding
We loosened up and everyone relaxed
But since the class of 66 was large
Numbers fluctuating around the 60 mark
We were split into two right from the start
And run as parallel classes
But there was also another division
That between the hostelites and the dayers
All this meant that one didn’t see everyone every day
Meetings often random and accidental
But as time went by friendships were forged
Walls dismantled, differences subdued
A spirit of togetherness constructed
On the sports field, at the tuck shop
After school, during events and trips
In the streets and in our living spaces
Between hostelites and dayers
Between hostelites and hostelites
And between dayers and dayers
It was a new episode of our lives
And the individual fruits we started as
Metamorphosed into an aromatic fruit salad
There was Manjula
With her single pleated pony tail
Often flung in front of her right shoulder
Always so happy and wearing a warm smile
Her friend Vasanti was as quiet as a kitten
Had a softer smile but her emotions ran deep
And then there was sprightly Chetana
Bumbly and dancing to an invisible tune
But half way through
Suddenly one day she wasn’t there
Little did she know
Of all the broken hearts she had left behind
There was the well-behaved Suraj
Always so positive and focussed
And never a harsh word
One could learn from her!
No matter how serious or sad
Abdul was always happy to crack a joke
He had found his niche
To irritate if he could
Chuni often bore the brunt
But was steadfast in his determination
And then there was Edward, some called him Nelson
Jounalistic and quick-witted
But often with something of a long story
Mohammed always appeared to be on another planet
Ready to spring on you if the wrong word be said
But he enjoyed his weekends paddling in water
To Bachubhai study was everything
Sporting a dry endearing humour
He was everyone’s friend
Thakor had a knack of keeping his eyes open
And would stare everyone out
But his eye was on commerce
Leaving early for a job in a bank
Pushpa never lost her sweet smile
Premila wasn’t there that long
But left an indelible mark
Quite happily Bhanu sat there quietly
It seemed in the same spot year after year
While Aruna had itchy feet and
Jumped about like a gazelle
Bearing no relation to her nickname Bread
Bachittar was sturdy and strong
But soft, friendly and amiable
He had time for everyone
Santokh had so much stamina he was a hero
Could swim all day long
And never say never
Jyotika's face always twinkled
While Vimlata, her friend
Once she had made up her mind could do no wrong
She produced a booklet on air planes
Thrilling perceptive Mrs Walker
For which she was given a prize
Her twin brother smart Rajni
One day decided to break the vegetarian taboo
And indulged in eating a boiled egg
Took some courage but it only takes a small step
To move onto another plane
In the hostel chicken had been introduced
And we were treated to githeri and ugali

Raman was warm-hearted, gentle and reflective
While Baldev, Kanti, Dinker and Manu
Were frank, patient and polite
Ramesh Aggarwal of Nanyuki
Was rowdy and boisterous
He did however have a soft side
Letting it be known
That he had fallen in love with a Form 3 girl
Ramesh Katechia, AKA Gama, on the other hand
One could only but respect
Cool, calm, collected, commanding and courteous
Harpal enjoyed his hockey and his writing
But even more important, a feather in his cap
Or should I say turban
He was a true sportsman
Had a lot of respect for others
And believed in fairness
The other Rajni was the Rajni of Juja
Looked like Raaj Kumar
And had a way with charcoal pencils
Producing bold and inspired images
When art was simply lost on us
Dalpat was calm, candid and sincere
Quietly intelligent but never boastful
Anil had a head start on us all
A sharp Nairobi, he resided with his uncle JC
Whose reputation as a ‘no-nonsense’ teacher
‘Gladly’ in the primary school
Rose before him and Anil was not immune
Anyway he also had a slap
From the delicate or
Should we say not so delicate Mrs Punja
For whistling at her in broad daylight
But he stuck to his story
Miss, I was just whistling, that’s all!
Being his favourite teacher
Abdul would have savoured the slap forever
For she was the Saira Banu of his dreams
There was a fashion in those days
If the names were not short and easy
They simply disappeared
The tongue-twister Chandrakant R Shah
 Became forever CR who never lost his smile
M K Patel MK and L M Patel LM
Initials that also became forms of endearment
We also had people with unusual nicknames
There was friendly Jet for whom haste was the word
Warm-hearted Bansi who didn’t need to play a flute
And somewhere also lurked Rashmi, Sashi, Salim, Chiman,
Sudharao, CS, Jaichand and Vijay
Caring, sincere and sensitive
We all played a role
The chatty, the creative, the considerate
The perceptive, the insightful and the truthful
We all played our part
And kept our dreams alive
For who can bear to feel themselves forgotten?
There was a time when
Falling in love almost became a fashion
Shy couples dispersed here and there
At break times and after school or whenever
And there was much discussion about what love was
Was it true or was it simply an infatuation?
Gulab was quiet and self-controlled but deep
His was a love story of great repute
Took him to the United States of America
With no other than our biology teacher
Peace Corp volunteer Miss Bogart
It must be true love, everyone said
But let it be known
That Miss Bogart was a fine teacher
Not embarrassed in the slightest
When Mohammed, who was an affable reminder
Of Cartwright ‘Hoss’, asked her one lesson
(you could see what was on his mind!)
How do mosquitoes do it, Miss?
To everyone’s fascination she illustrated the answer
Filling the whole blackboard with meaningful drawings
Geographer Mrs Trikha was like a mother figure
Always impressed with general knowledge
And excellent at organising functions
She had standards so you can understand
How she must have felt
When Hasmukh accidentally spilt black ink
On her daughter’s red Kashmiri waistcoat
Which he wore for a school play
He got it dry-cleaned twice
But unfortunately this was not to her satisfaction!
Tall Jayanti was a gentleman
Patient, polite and perceptive
But JC had named him Fatso
To egg him on when playing football
But because he was a jolly good fellow the name stuck
Lanky David was polite and likeable
To wean him off his habit
Of forever keeping his hands in his pockets
His parents had the pockets of all his shorts sewn-up
Peter’s eyes were always on the sports field
He lived and dreamed the 100-metre sprint
A sight to behold on sports day
Hefty thighs, robust pulsating calf muscles
Compact elegant ankles striding past all others
Flying like a cheetah
And achieving an astounding 10.8 seconds
Rasik after loud and excited come ons
Determined but completely exhausted
Was elated he managed to finish the mile
Like a king, athletic Mr Cheema presided
As other feats were accomplished on Sports Day
With energy, enthusiasm and exuberance
Points amassed for the houses
Napolean, Tagore, Churchill and Lincoln
Hip hip hooray, hip hip hip hooray
Later on the points could also be secured
For classwork and homework via merit cards
Historian MK Patel was full of surprises
Rajni, can you please go to the office
And get me a merit card?
To Rasik’s utter surprise
He gave it to him for drawing a colourful map
Of the first 13 states of America
As reflected in our names
Ahmed, Amrit, Ashok and Ashwin
Patrick, Pavittar, Prabhu and Pravin
Indira, Nyakonya, Nila and Saroj

This was the school that crossed borders
A pool of individuals of different bearings together
Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh all were one
Boy, girl and folk of every hue all one
Persons of each and every background one
Speakers of different languages one
No one made to feel they were alone
Merit and hard work admired
Good deeds respected
Only we could have produced a multi-lingual sentence
Like ‘Sulvari yangu no fanya goom last year’
As a result spheres of influence there were many
Radio also played a role
It was good for the latest releases
The answer my friend is Blowing in the Wind
Return to Sender, address unknown
No such number, no such zone
You’re the Devil in Disguise, oh yes you are
The hairy boys from Liverpool
Somewhat took over during our time
It was one hit after another
She Loves You, From Me to You, Can’t Buy Me Love
I want to Hold your Hand, Day Tripper yeah
But in great contention were songs from
The Bombay film industry
Which came along with heart throbs
On the lips of girls were
Dev Anand, Sunil Dutt, Shashi Kapoor, Dilip Kumar
And in the minds of boys
Nutan, Sadhana, Waheeda Rehman, Saira Banu
New songs filled our vocabularies almost every week
Mere mehboob tuje meri muhobat ki kasam
Ek ghar banauga tere ghar ke samne
Chalo eek bar phirse ajnabi bun jaye ye hum dono
Lag ja gale se phir ye haseen raat ho na ho
Ai phoolon ki rani, bahaaron ki malika
Jaane walo zara mudke dekho muje ek insaan hun
Waqt se din aur raat, waqt se kal aur aaj
Tere mere sapane ubh ek rung hei
And they were sung, hummed and whistled
For weeks, months and even years after
Some wrote fan letters to their favourite stars
And proudly showed off the signed photos received
Added to songs were the cinema and the television
Every so often someone would report on a film
They had seen on the big screen in the capital
Antics of Oddjob discussed at length
007’s lucky escape from Goldfinger’s laser scrutinized
Raj Kapoor and Vijayantimala’s scene dissected
Did they really kiss?
Did Sangam forever break the taboo?
Television had begun to play a role in everyone’s life. There was spellbound silence when the Bonanza family, Ben, Adam, Hoss and Little Joe Cartwright, took to the screen in the hostel TV room or when Clint Eastwood came on the screen in Rawhide. Our lives were a microcosm of the larger society. So of course there were moments, instances of madness and badness, whisperings of naughty goings on, inappropriate exploits. Certain books made the rounds. Miles of thoughts remained unsaid, but call it growing up. All gently shaking and shaping our futures. But we also enjoyed James Hadley Chase, Harold Robbins, Ian Fleming and Agatha Christie. However at school we had different books. Early on, the stern Mr Vaid relived the anxious story of The Winslow Boy. And in Form 3 The Chrysalids was brought to life by smart and exacting Mr Casteleno. Suddenly everyone thought they were telepathic! Earnest Mrs Walker ensured we pronounced our words clearly and that our punctuation marks were rightly placed. Bright and breezy Mr Walker was a great swimmer. And soon he had everyone gliding performing the front crawl, the back crawl and the butterfly. Tall Mr Tarlock Singh wore his turban tight. Took pride in his proofs, ended them with QED. But what is QED sir? ‘We have proved what we set out to prove.’ But what do the letters stand for? Slowly and neatly he would scrawl Quod Erat Demonstrandum. But when he saw even stranger faces he smiled, ‘just call it Question Easily Done!’
Mr L M Patel on the other hand was very relaxed
And always ready to demonstrate the physics
Once standing on a chair
Releasing a pencil and a book at the same time
It was to prove Galileo’s theory
That the time taken by falling bodies
Was the same irrespective of mass
But because it happened so quickly
He was happy to do it again
To broaden our knowledge of chemistry
Gineal Mr Shori joyously talked about
Helium, hydrogen and oxygen and used litmus
To exhibit the blue of acid and the red of alkali
Mr Mawani, our Gujerati teacher, it was reputed
Had to look through the steering wheel to drive
But his knowledge of Sahitya Ratna did him credit
We had Mr Furtado, Mr Bhardwaj and Mr Carvalho
Mr Seth, the wispy sounds of sweet Miss Woodhouse
Colouring and influencing our lives
At the end of the year party
Mr Sweeting proved he was a great dancer
When LM also rose to the challenge and sang
Jalte hain jiske liye teri aankhon ke diye
Dhoond laya hoon vohi geet mein tere liye
While impressionable youngsters looked on in wonder
Panesar came late but soon made an impact
He believed he could hypnotise
And convinced many to be his subjects
But many came out the same door they went in
However he had a knack for taking good photos
And to everyone’s delight
He did get his picture of an escaped cheetah
Published in the Daily Nation!
The tall Aziz joined us late
Having spent some time at a school in the capital
Brought with him practical wisdom
Was good at telling everyone how to end letters
When was it to be yours faithfully
And when was it to be yours sincerely
And when yours truly?
We practised these and new endings
In our fan letters to
The stars of the Indian cinema
To Sadhana yours honestly
To Waheeda Rehman yours candidly
And in our letters to our pen friends
In England, Germany, the United States
What would Paul in Nome, Alaska
Think of a letter ending ‘yours truthfully’?

Trips out of school were other joys
Behind the scenes dedicated teachers
Making them happen
There was a wonderful class walk to
The spectacle of Fourteen Falls
A good thirty miles there and back
A lovely opportunity to cross the barriers
Especially those between boys and girls
And since you didn’t always have to
Make an eye to eye contact
Walking somehow made it easy
What started with a shy smile
Became a jumbled statement
Needing yet more jumbled explanations
All that free and easy talking in films
How did they do it?
But by the end of the day
Veils were lifted, curtains opened
Friendships made, times encapsulated
A trip to Mount Longonot
In a truck and most of it on rough roads
Thoroughly tested our bottoms
The vast expanse of the Rift Valley welcomed us
In our minds we played the hominid story
As we walked along the ridge of the caldera
On the scree taking one step forward and two back
Being unearthed by the Leakeys not so far away
In the caldera we spotted zebra and giraffe
And on the path large droppings of buffalo
At picnic-time we posed for photos
Forever fixing the moment
It was at the Nairobi Show
In amongst the farming fraternity
That we had our first hotdogs, very moreish
With lashings of mustard and tomato sauce

Organised by the Walkers and Mrs Trikha
A visit to the opera, still hard to believe
At the National in Nairobi one evening
Was indeed a Form 4 highlight
Hard to fathom the pomp and circumstance
Gilbert and Sullivan’s 1880’s production
The Gondoliers set in watery Venice
Lived up to every expectation
The costumes and the sets amazing
Acting and singing even more miraculous
Comedy was apparent as the young bride
Searching for the prince arrives in Venice
But which one of the two?
And both already married to local girls
But all ends well when the real Prince is found
On the caldera’s edge, Mount Longonot, Rift Valley

Happy to pose for a photo (photo by Harpal Punia)
But the four years were soon over
No one told us ‘that was that’
That once more we were on our own
Again we had to seek our own path
To free fall into fast-moving time
And be swept into new circumstances
However it has to be said
We were indelibly registered on each other’s minds
Somewhere the connections were retained
Within we would always lean on each other
On the friendships we had stockpiled
In our time at the M P Shah Central High School
And school, you can be certain, was its fitting name
For everyone in it had learned
About living together
How great it was therefore
To carry all that understanding into the future
A great foundation on which to build upon
A fertile base on which to grow ideas
Each one of us took so much
We had come along with bags of prejudice
But we were departing with bags of
Commonality, sensitivity and tolerance
Needless to say we missed the school
Our classmates and all that it had provided
Our teachers, each one a hero
Each one leaving enduring marks on our psyche
To be remembered fondly forever
Our teachers
How could anyone put a price on it?
What we had could only be shared, not bought
But we were thankful for the experience
Which had taught us about human nature
Given each one of us the inspiration
To strive towards new goals
To work hard and to find a new purpose
To climb new mountains
To keep us strong and strive forth
The spirit of Thika beckoned
‘Rise to the challenge and never say never
Carry with you all you have acquired
A smile, a helping hand, courage, humanity
Openness, warmth, modesty, good thinking
Kindness, the vision of sharing and laughter
The world is waiting, take it on’
Wishing each other well
In love we departed
Carrying just a pen and a suitcase
Like the pineapples of Thika
Which were sent far and wide
We arrived in new countries
On new continents, new soil
And just like our parents
We had to summon the pioneering spirit
But this time it was for our generation
Today I am so happy
I feel as if I am on top of Mount Kenya
After all we haven’t seen each other for years
And I take much pleasure in saying
That it is not kwaheri

It’s Jambo with a big J

Rasik Bhadresa, 1966