

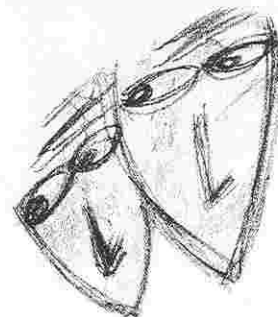


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ood writing is rare; so is critical appreciation. Translating, too is challenging especially when the target is to transliterate or transmogrify! This issue of ML has stories, poems and of course translations. With "ekushey" being so close to our target publication date, it was only appropriate to have included translations as we had wanted to set up a section for translations on the site from day one.

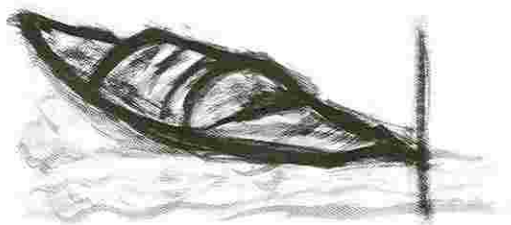
The cover, on the other hand, reflects the spirit to steer and win. What can be won is worth fighting for and what is achievable must be attempted.

Hence www.monsoonletters.com, once again plays with the colored threads and dares heights. A simple rainbow's not enough and beyond skies is what we are looking for.

Rubana H.

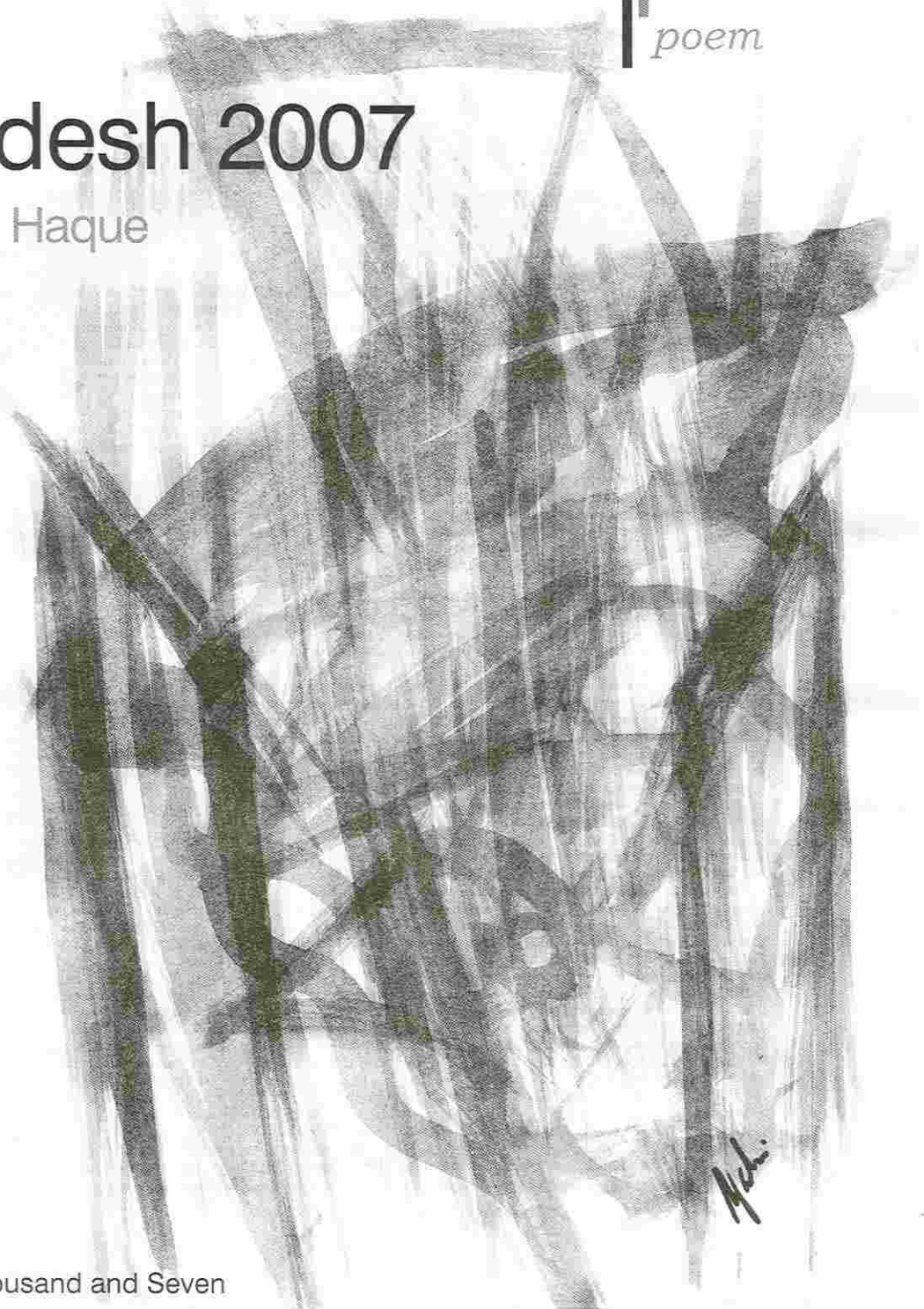
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Bangladesh 2007

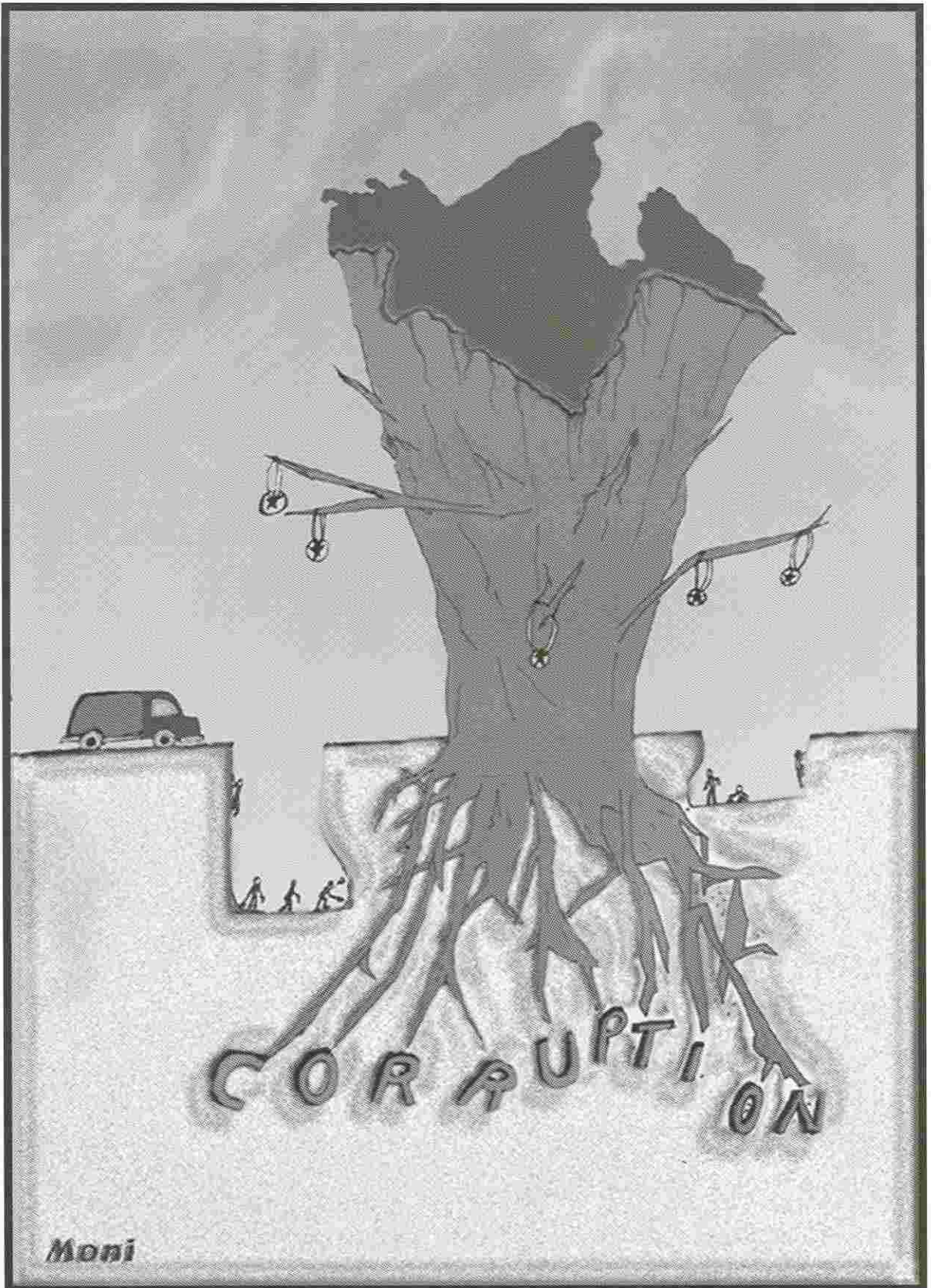
by Maqsoodul Haque



Bangladesh in Two Thousand and Seven
is in overdue labor pain,
the collective handiwork
of those that prefer keeping us in chains
fettors and shackles
the aborted freedom child promised to us
in the histrionic Seventy One
an unholy misnomer.

Corruption

by Enamul Hoq Moni



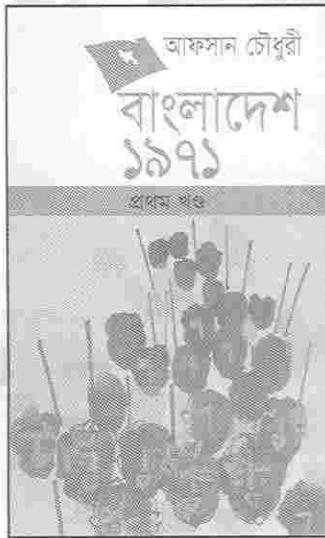
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AFSAN CHOWDHURY

Bangladesh 1971

Vol 1

Preface translated
by Tahmina Shafique



THIS initiative has been born out of limitations that have emerged though several generations of historical writings and essays on 1971. We felt that in many cases, more than establishment of the information and experience, the subject or object of historical writing was moving on to be based on politics. The debate over independence is just the beginning of this very problem. Ordinary people are not aware of the facts simply because, history has become intertwined with politics. However, it is everyone's right to know about what had actually happened.

Having examined the multitude of historical information and practices available, we felt in many cases historical recollections of 1971 was not just influenced by politics but also by the events surrounding the birth of a new state. Here, the history of that time mostly mentions the nation leaders and ignores the reflections of ordinary people. We feel this makes it an incomplete history. History should be defined by both the state and society. We tried to mitigate this shortcoming to some extent.

The problem is, of course, to some extent systematic. In this region, the state framework and society are interlinked. Most of the political history

has shaped into a history of nation building. Besides this, the experiences, aspirations and thoughts of ordinary people have received limited importance or mention. It is due to this very disconnected history that people tend to lose interest and faith in history.

This has led to an imbalance between the state and societal history in our nation's history.

National history tends to eclipse individuals ones. These individual or personal histories, in the process, reach the point of vanishing from being incomplete. As a result, or the 'National' historical writings often tend to include imaginary or inaccurate elements.

Power is deeply rooted in the knowledge of history. The lessons from the past are important in the present and the future and this equally true in case of politics. This is why national political history becomes a key part of determining the allocation of power in politics. This trend means that in the future, historical research may be based on political grounds. It is due to these reasons that political historians stress on the importance of being very careful and keeping history separate from the centre of power.

National politics primarily describes local leaders and organizations. This practice is regarded as mainstream. Since the source of the mainstream is based on state and its administrators. This is the main cause for which, history does not include society and is promulgated from state run schools and political organizations.

Besides this, personal experiences are often ignored. On the other hand, in case of societal history, accounts that are unrelated to some political or national movement are expected to be weak or unstable.

In case of Bangladesh, the widespread personal experience requires close inspection. In the first part of this initiative, we have collected and catalogued various books. According to our knowledge, there are references in about 2000 volumes. We can estimate that from 1972 till the end of 2006, there has been on an average, one or two books published per week. Our catalogue is definitely incomplete. The inclusion of personal opinions may be considered a problem, perhaps because it has conformed to representative history. Those who have written have of course not ignored their own interest. However, individual accounts and perspectives have not been able to replace the representative history of the nation. ❖

photo essay

Before the last sky

photo essay by Hassan Nabil



h

undreds of kites are chasing birds above the age old houses. There is no room between those age old structures but who cares? There's a vast sky above, bare rooftops within the tattered texture is more than enough. Thousands of youngsters with their slick little hawks are trying to create a new canopy over old Dhaka. Yes, this was "Shakrayin", the kite festival of old Dhaka that took place on 15th January on the "Poush Shongkranti" meaning the last day of Bengali month "Poush". It has been an age old tradition when kites flutter in old Dhaka cityscape instead of birds. Millions of pigeons rest at their abode, vultures and hawks of Sadarghat dare not to come out of aeries, in case they get ravaged with the furious kites!

The youngsters gather all their savings before Shakrayin and rob the kite shops abundantly before the fest begins. Then they prepare a sticky substance with glass dust, herbal glue and color which is called the "Manza". The thread of kite is kept submerged into it and then dried and rolled on the "Latai" so that the thread becomes deadly to cut another kite's thread while flying. This is war, a war of kites! After the preparation, they began practicing and slowly kites became visible above old Dhaka texture on 13th and 14th.

Not only youngsters but their older cousins, even fathers and uncles enter the war to enjoy, perhaps cherish their memories and reverse the hourglass for a while. It's really awesome to see the whole family flying kites together and shouting "yawp" like savages. When they challenge a nearby rooftop, they shout at them saying "Duo, duo". And the next rooftop responds and all of their kites begin chasing the other. The 'Latai' is not a steering to play NFS but if you have the skill to direct your kite efficiently, cutting the thread is a matter of minutes. When the opponent's thread is cut, the triumphant screams saying "Bagatta", meaning I've cut it. Kites that are cut fly whimsically with the wind and rest on higher structures but if you have a bamboo "logee" with you, catching that nomad is another game. Kids jump and lean from the rooftops recklessly to catch a kite that's gone "Bagatta". Until the evening invades, the activities of Dhakaiyas go on ceaselessly. As the sun sets, youths gather with flame torch and spray mouthful of kerosene on it directing the sky and the old Dhaka texture go in flames. Hmmm, pretty risky but nobody remains daunted this time too and chase the setting sun to keep the rooftops enlightened. Finally the fest ends with sparkling fireworks leaving trails of mirth for the birds to catch up later on. It's awesome, really awesome; language could hardly define the glee. Visuals of the kite war would serve the rest, hopefully.

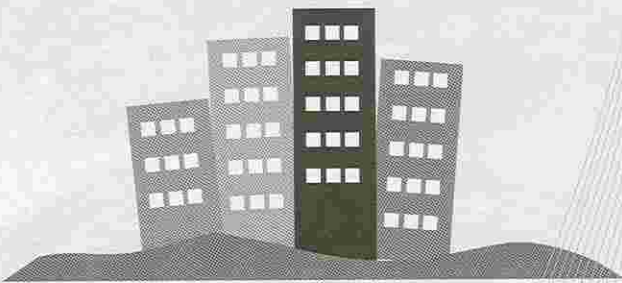


Dhaka in Rain

by Adnan M. S. Fakir



Ice cream steaming in the road-side van
Rain etching itself down feeble walls.
Children running wild in the water by the drain
Whilst an old man cuddles himself to the chill of rain.
The careworn farmer elates to the gift of God
And crops float with the rhythm of the waves
As a city girl with flowing black hair
Stares out to the silk of rain.
Beggars crowd the hide of railway stations
While rickshaw pullers embrace their fate
Crows rinse on telephone wires
Whereas hungry dogs search wet garbage bins.
Few cars splash water on the drenched streets
And clouds play with the dews of spring,
Families on roofs feel the mirth of rain
Just as everything remains the same.



Grey

by Jamshyd Osman

How paradigms can change
How innocence is slain
Minuscule are we
Tripping on free will
Love is born, Love is killed
Unkind origins of sin
Come to gather & separate
Are we all born ingrate

I lay probed
Investigated
Molested
Open as a book
For all eyes to see
Filled with contempt they look upon me
Their tongues hissing at yours truly

Did they find what they were probing for?
Their frowns might tell a story
Couldn't say owing to my current state of misery
As i lay self-conscious & timid
Like a traumatized wild animal
Struggling with the reality of being caged & probed
Intoxicated & bound with rope
I set my vision on the window as i lay
Watching the aftermath of the setting sun
Turning the vivid orange sky to grey

No hope
Only Dismay
They throw me back in my dark corner cage
Probing done for the day
In shock & horror i shivered away
Flooding of thoughts of mistakes made
Scenes of moments when i felt like a spade
Little did i know that the curtains would be raised
All my sins & my deeds
Would one day be projected onto screens
Your antics would but seize
A lab rat you would seem

Not black not white
Just Grey
Its the order of the day
Too much or too little to say
For my sins I must pay

'Lesson'

by Shampad Rahmatullah



You cannot say we have not lived,
For we have braved the fires of our own.
You cannot say we know not loss,
For what have we gained if not loss's trust?

Have we not stared Death in its eyes?
Hoping against hope we do not blink?
Have we not shed tears of sinful blood?
For our sweat and toil were to preserve the crimson prisoner.

We have toiled, despaired; we have died
A million deaths in the shadow of our kin.
And yes we have laughed, for mirth was our reward
For the sun lusts for the night with virgin passion.

You stand here, on the precipice of your life
Hoping for answers, and that we have none.
For you too will grasp at Hope's wings and fall
Unfettered into ruin, or close enough.

And you shall rise again, just as we have,
If God is that kind.
Or you shall join Him on the upper side,
If you were that kind.

Or you shall burn in the fires of life's very flames,
Wishing for Hell to end your sacred baptism.
Hope that life is truly that kind.
And maybe you shall join us one final time.

So advice we have, so listen well.
Know that we have gained, and we have lost,
Know that we have hated, and we have loved,
Know that we have cried tears of joy, tears of sorrow, tears of mercy.

But final of all, know this one truth.
That we have lived our lives, full and true.
A lifetime was given to us to live as we would.
And we lived with glory, setting our suns in seas forever blue.

The auburn sky

by Kutubuddin Kamal

 A large, stylized illustration of a rainbow with footprints and flying saucers. The rainbow is composed of multiple overlapping, wavy lines in shades of grey and white. Black footprints are scattered along the length of the rainbow, as if someone has walked on it. Several flying saucers, depicted as dark discs with a lighter center and a small antenna-like protrusion, are scattered around the rainbow, some appearing to fly towards or away from it. The background is a light, textured grey.

T

HE auburn sky was getting gloomy. Distant clouds traversed the sky ingeniously while a gentle breeze wandered around. She sat near the riverbank alone, studying the water running by without a worry. Her luminous brown eyes stared into some unknown space, her disheveled hair tied in an untidy knot above her head. The memories came flooding back to her like tidal waves crashing onto the shore. In her 14 years of life she had never felt so alone, so helpless.

Her father's voice still echoed in her head, the words piercing through her soul. Her mother's face soaked in tears created a picture in her mind that was hard to efface.

Her whole life seemed to be flashing in front of her eyes and she tried to quell the emotions that had bundled up and were about to erupt like a volcano.

The breeze was getting stronger now and the memories kept coming back.

Mina was the only child of her parents, living in the small village of Comilla. The family owned a shabby two-roomed cottage; her father was a fishmonger and her mother stayed home all day, often cleaning the house or cooking. Money was never abundant in the family, unlike her mother's love for her, who always treated her like a little princess in her own little ways. Her mother would make her little dolls out of old weathered pieces of cloth, stitched together and would always cook her daughter's favorite meals whenever she would get the opportunity. Mina's amiable and modest nature earned her the affection of her teachers and neighbors who adored her.

Despite all the love she got, Mina had a constant aching in her heart that haunted her, night and day.

Ever since Mina was old enough to be aware of her surroundings, she developed a tiny void in her heart. She had never gotten to know her father. He had built an icy exterior around himself, which was never to be penetrated especially not by his daughter. Mina feared his arrogance and inexplicable temper, and was tremendously intimidated by him. Even as a young child she could comprehend that her father was completely indifferent towards her and would detest any initiative taken by her to make conversations with him. Once she had asked her mother

"Amma, why does Abba hate me?"

Her mother looked alarmed and instantly put on a awkward smile and replied saying,

"Oh dear, Your Abba doesn't hate you, who told you that?"

"Well...he never talks to me"

"He is just very busy, he loves you more than I do" She smiled again reassuringly and ran her hand across Mina's forehead.

Mina was not to be fooled and it wasn't long before she was hit by the truth.

It was a cold winter afternoon and the air felt like iced water. Mina was 8 years old then and on that particular Tuesday, was sent back home early from school. She ran all the way home in the bitter weather. As the ecstatic little girl was about to enter the house, she heard voices coming from inside and stopped. Her father was yelling at the top of his voice and she could hear her mother crying.

"It is all your fault! You gave birth to a girl, and I am ashamed to even show my face in public!"

The words hit her like a dagger, cutting through deep into her flesh. Terrified, She ran away from the house and wandered around till it was the usual time for her to come back home from school. She had finally learned the reason for her father's total disregard of her existence. She did not cry and neither did she hate her father. She wanted him to love her; she wanted him to see that she was no less than a son. She wanted to belong.

When she returned, everything was calm; her father had left and her mother was quietly weeping at the corner of the room sitting on her bed. When she saw Mina, she was a little taken aback, managed a forced smile and wiped her eyes.

"I had a really bad headache"

Even if she hadn't known the truth, Mina would still know that her mother was lying. The sorrow in her eyes was inevitable.

From that day onwards, Mina worked hard at school and did as much of the house chores as she possibly could. All for a little appreciation from her father, maybe just a vague smile. Knowing that her father loathed her, she still tried her best to trigger a little bit of emotion in her father's unyielding heart but in vain.

Years passed by like silent nights and Mina never expressed the pain she felt, it was all safely locked up in her little heart, never to be revealed.

It was early in the morning today, right after dawn, when Mina was awoken by loud voices booming inside her room like satanic demons flying about. Confused and a little panic-stricken, she slowly got up from her bed and almost soundlessly made her way to the tiny opening of her shattered room that led to the adjoining room of her parents. The girl was trembling in fear, as the voices got louder by each step she took. Her heart pounding heavily, she peeked inside the room. To her horror, she saw her father standing at the far end of the room with a huge bamboo stick in his right hand, constantly swearing and yelling, his enraged face had turned red.

Her mother lay on the floor, on the other side of the room, sobbing uncontrollably. Her hair spread all across her face, like a lunatic. Little drops of blood trickled down from her arms and cheeks, from where the bamboo stick had smashed into her.

Her father was still yelling, like an obscene monster whose hunger was yet to be satisfied. The bitter words spoken, passed by like a blurry train to Mina and she couldn't capture the words. What she was seeing was too appalling for her to absorb. Eventually the words seemed to make sense to her.

"I'm leaving, I'll go to the City for a job. You can go where ever you want with your daughter!"

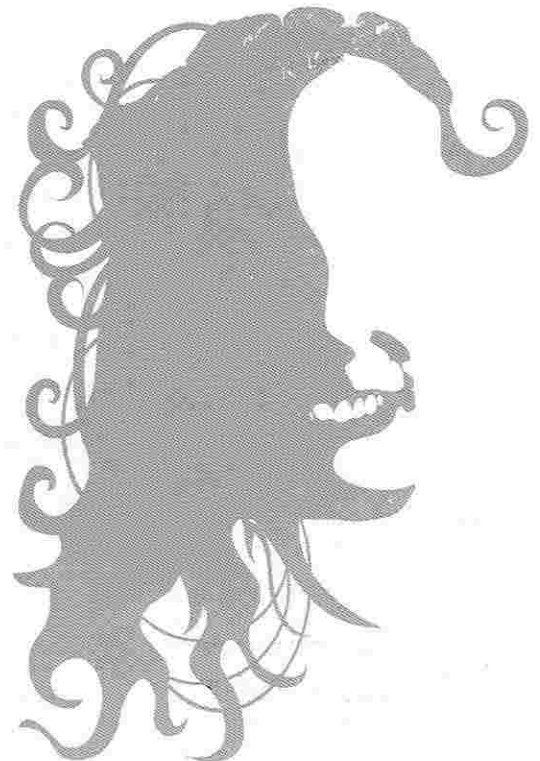
"Please...Please..don't leave us. Where shall we go? This is my home!" The words were almost inaudible through her sobbing.

"I don't care! You gave birth to a daughter and now I'm cursed!"

Mina could no longer bear to listen to what her father had yet to say. She ran, she ran as fast as her legs would allow her, trying to run away from the words, that cursed her for not being a son.

It had been hours since she sat by the secluded river and it was the first time that she had cried. And it was the first time that she had felt numb.

A new tomorrow and a newer struggle were about to begin. She took one last look at the celestial moon, and had started walking back home. ❖



Yesterdaze

by Wasim Khan

Cold & wet, December day,
Icy waters, skies so gray.
Tears and rain drops on my face,
Remembering my yesterdaze.

Yesterdaze,
Were not meant for me.

Rivers run wild, tears dry unwiped,
Soul searching for more comfort,
Time and time again, I ask myself again,
What were your reasons for leaving me?

Tears and rain drops on my face,
It's getting harder to tell the difference,
A peace of mind, a broken silence.

Yesterdaze, not meant for me,
Not plain to see,
Nothing less than a fantasy.



Loneliness

by Wasim Khan

Depreciate, Depression, Damn the gates!
Deprived, Devastated, Desolates!
Never asked for you help.
Never got what I wanted out of life,
Isolate, I so late, I for eternity, eternity...

Appreciate, Growth rate, Baby steps,
Exclusion, Experiment, Exhale your brain,
It's inside you, it's inside me, It's everywhere, everywhere...

Ask yourself, are you happy?
Are you free?
Are you where you want to be?

Bite my black tongue,
Taste my bitterness,
My loneliness, loneliness, loneliness...
Tell me what's so great about this fabricated bliss,
Even the Good book says that this life is just an illusion.
My loneliness is an illusion.

The regretful ending

by Sarah Soha

Splashes of pink, blue, violet painting the heavens
 Fluffy cottons illuminate, demonstrating the supremacy of the sun.
 It was time
 No more u turns
 Had come too far.
 Taking a deep breath, I closed my lifeless eyes
 Flashback of some memories
 Some colorful; mostly black and whites
 My eyes no longer holding them back
 Letting them fall
 Drop by drop
 Each drop resembling one black and white
 Yet it will never be enough.
 Soul was shattered
 Legs were tired
 There was no reason to blame them.
 When I opened those wet eyes
 I found myself falling from the rock face
 The wind piercing my soul guardian
 Those messy black hair of mine turning messier
 Pumping machine pounding faster
 The force pulling me closer
 Accelerating in each second
 Realization comes with a price
 This time it was my life.
 We see, till our capacity
 Not the end of horizon
 This registration process in my control panel was finally done
 The unique gift taken granted for all this time will soon be gone
 I closed my eyes once more
 Waiting...
 For a loud crash
 For a pain
 That will end it all.

Whitened

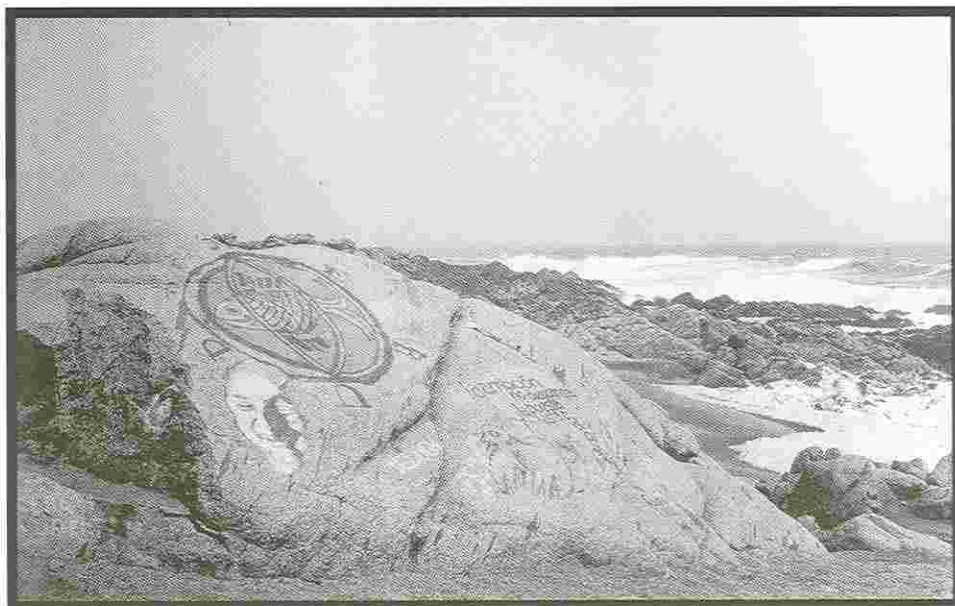
by Mushira Habib

When I'll be covered in that white piece of cloth,
 Will be whitened out of life,
 Will I be whitened out of sight too?
 Won't hear much, as have heard enough in life
 Won't care much, as my care will be over with the cover.
 But will my feelings die in there too?
 They died often when I tried living.
 Yet alive when they need not have lived
 Won't dreams ever follow?
 They fed life, so won't they breed corpses?

The Crush

And life goes on...

by Saria Tasneem Ahmed



Note: Saturday, 6 p.m.

Its just another evening out at our favorite, yet shady, joint with my two close friends, a couple nonetheless, cuddling and ignoring my slur of words, and in walks that girl, wait – make that ‘the girl’, doing her thing. I try to catch her eye, but in vain and try my best to put on a seductive smile lest she looks my way, which she will no doubt; I know I stand out.

She’s looking! She’s looking! Okay easy now tiger. That’s right, smirk a little, not too much and give her that nod. I love her. I do. Look at her! Tilting her head and looking at me with her big brown eyes and oh, she’s giggling now. No wait, she just winced. Uh ho!

And it’s happening. The disaster, you know, that clumsy virus that always has to follow me around. Call it ‘cluminzitis’ if you will! What is happening, you ask?

Well see, since my eyes are busy working overtime, my hands have been left to their own devices, and they accidentally push my drink aside, which in turn, sweeps off the table and onto the floor.

All eyes on me! Maybe this is not so bad after all... Do I see her choking in mirth?

Now I have my future wife thinking I am a klutz. I am not saying that she wouldn’t have found it out sooner or later, but this really isn’t the time; talk about first impressions. She’s lovely, she is; what

would I do without her?

Yes, pick the table at the far end of the room so that you’re out of my reach! Women! Always playing hard to get and flipping their hair and batting their eyelashes. There should be a federal law against *crime passionel!*

Now all I have to do is go talk to her. Hopefully she will fail to notice the ketchup stain on my shirt. Or my wrinkled pants, or, never mind all that!

Let me just stand up and make my way there. Okay good, she’s only across the room buddy. Just a couple of steps away! Don’t blow it now.

Three more steps and I’m there. Oh boy, I literally have the butterflies in my stomach bellowing out her name! Wonder what her name is? Could she be a Sheila, or maybe even a Nina? The answer lies only moments away.

What is this I see – a ring? She’s married!?! Oh, this shattered heart! Crushed that I am!

Better turn around and walk in the opposite direction before someone notices the disappointment in my eyes; I need to sit down first. Fie on that vile woman! Giving a man dreams which are never to be fulfilled!

I hope she gives birth to a couple of monsters! Angel indeed; absolutely preposterous and misleading and... Oh, my achy-breaky heart... oh! That is it; I will die a bachelor. I have had it with women and their witch-craft!

Note: Saturday, 8 p.m.

This is boring! I have been standing here near the buffet table waiting for my sister to appear for the past twenty minutes; might as well get myself something to eat.

I must say, the sight of the food is enough to beat any other interests whatsoever. Wonder where I should start from?

What is that whiff? Is that an angel my nostrils detect? My grey cells deduce that it is, and they are right. The beautiful angel stands across the buffet table from me. Oh she just looked at me and smiled. An inviting smile I see. Yes, this is my time to shine.

Now all I have to do is push that old hag beside her and stand close to her to get a better look, and smell, of that walking-talking-and-breathing piece of art.

Okay it's been two minutes already and this obese woman, who has so conveniently occupied the space between the woman of my dreams and me, still won't move. Someone better tell her that she is allowed to have more than one helping before I put my fist in her mouth!

She's simply dreamy, she is; and I am not talking about the obese woman. Petite, graceful, alluring, and seems to have the appetite of Godzilla himself! Well, food is good... right? Its must be! Yes yes, it is it is. It has to be!

Maybe someone should also tell my glutton-of-an-angel that she is allowed to have several helpings! How long has it been since her last meal anyway?! I wonder how she keeps fit. All that food in that little stomach!

I say, I think the alarm in my head just went off – Hog Alert!!! My-wife-to-be is going to ruin my money on meals! I can just picture her right there, her eating desperately with a fork and a knife while I stare away, gaping and with eyes full of disbelief. I'd probably touch her elbow to indicate that people were watching, and she'd pay no heed to me or any of my signals! Preposterous!

Better get the hell out of here before I turn green. Women! They just keep on breaking your hearts until there is no more blood to make to bleed! If only I could storm out of here right at this moment, that would teach her a lesson! Oh, that cream-roll looks appetizing...

Note: Saturday, 11:00 p.m.

Look, I'm not a shallow guy, strictly speaking that is. I only like beautiful women. Is that too much to ask for? I mean it's only fair that I have an eye-candy to ogle at after a long day's work. Wow, what's with that look?

Anyway, so here I am, playing poker at Audy's again. It's become a ritual really, showing up for poker every Saturday night and shooting some hoops later on in the night. None of us seem to mind this schedule; takes the load off of most of us.

Ace of diamonds and two of spades, not bad, could work for me really. I wonder when the game starts. Stakes are high tonight, maybe if I can just

bluff my way through. Look at that smug grin on Meraz's face, thinks he's all high and mighty with just one win. I'll show him!

What's that smell? I wonder if any of the guys can smell this, its enchanting I tell you! Simply delicious. I hope it doesn't turn out to be a whiff of Audy's wife! That just wouldn't do.

And, it is her! Damn that woman! Women should be banned from smelling good after their marriage; maybe she has a sister (?). Mmm... just maybe. Thank God she's not much of a looker though; she'd have Audy kicking our shins till they turn cherry red. I want to giggle, but then again, never mind.

Now where was I? Right the jack of dice and oh yes yes, game-plan game-plan. Right, from now on I'm playing hard-to-get. Yes-sir-re, I am a tough-nut, a hard-cheese, a man-of-steel, a rough-soldier, a ... oh, she's marvelous! I hope she can't see me gaping like this but she is an angel, a very petite one at that. Look at her floating in through the hallway, her dupatta flowing in the air behind her; it's like a scene from a photo-shoot, you know, where the model has three low-raise fans pointed at her direction and she walks that walk and puts a cherry in her mouth and gives you a sumptuous look? Yes, that one. Don't call me an exaggerator, its true!

Why else would I make sheep-eyes at her? Maybe I should go talk to her before any of these other idiots think of it first. She looks confused though, I wonder who she's looking for. Maybe I should advance my assistance like the gentleman that I am. Oh, and she is coming my way; been seduced by that man-charm of mine already albeit! Better put on my welcoming smile and look her in the eye. Smack my lips? Nah, uncalled for really.

She's going to speak it seems. I'll wait anxiously as to hear her first words:

"Wasef Bhaiya, have you seen my brother?"

Eh? Come again? Bhaiya who? No, no it can't be! This is Audy's sister! I mean she's supposed to be sixteen or something. This is my worst nightmare ever! I've been enticed by a sixteen-year-old gypsy. Oh, she has entrapped me amidst her dark locks and pouting mouth and, what the hell am I saying? She's sixteen, and here I am writing her a panegyric epic!

I am cursed I tell you! Blast this whole show. Oh Jesus, now I sound like a Brit! Oh could this get any worse? I better storm out and leave an impression. After all, in two years she'll be... no no, she's sixteen! I have to get out of here! What am I thinking? Arghh, I need fresh air!

Outside...

Much better! Going over the whole day, it really hasn't been all that bad. I mean life has its ups and downs, but it's up to us to make the best out of it. I suppose love doesn't really last and... I feel like I'm quoting Doogie Houser here!

Bottom line: there are other women, and also, going commando takes guts. ❖

জসীম উদ্দীন

আম্মার এমন মধুর বাংলা ভাষা
ভায়ের বোনের আদর মাথা
মায়ের বরকের ভালোবাসা।

এই ভাষা রামধন চড়ে
সোনার স্বপন ছড়ায় ভবে
যদুগ যদুগান্ত পথটি ধরে
নিত্য তাদের যাওয়া আসা,

পদব বাঙলার নদীর থেকে
এনেছি এর সুর,
শস্য দোলা বাতাস দেছে
কথা সন্নমধর,

বজ্র এরে দেছে আলো
ঝঞ্ঝা এরে দোল দোলালো
পদ্মা হল মলনাশা।

বসনে এর রঙ মেখেছি
তাজা বরকের খনে
বলেটোর ধনুজালে
ওড়না বিহার বরনে,

এ ভাষারি মান রাখিতে
হয় যদি বা জীবন দিতে
চারকোটি ভাই রক্ত দিয়ে
পরাবে এর মনের আশা।

JASIMUDDIN

The sweetest of languages is my Bangla;
Steeped in the affection of brothers and sisters,
And the love of mothers' hearts.

This language rides the rainbow,
Scatters golden dreams in the land;
As its daily traffic flows
Along the road of eternity.

The rivers of East Bengal
Have lent it its music
And the crop-swaying winds
Have given it the sweet voice.

Thunder has lent it light
The storm has stirred it to life
And the Padma became a river of sorrows.

I've dyed its dress with the blood
from tender breasts
As the smoke from fired bullets
weaves its magical veil.

If a sacrifice of lives be ever needed
To uphold the dignity of this tongue
Forty million souls would be ready to bleed
And fulfill its great expectations.

Translated by Syed Manzoorul Islam

MUHAMMAD NURUL HUDA

Men are not rivers, yet in their hearts
Burns the raging thirst of rivers.

The youthful blood that was spilled in Fifty-two
With its tidal thirst suddenly becomes
A river of humanity across the Dravidian delta;
See how on its alluvial soil is slowly built
An un-Aryan homeland, like a cascading stream
The habitat of a vernal race.

The language dearest to man lives on
In the sound of the rivers.

Translated by Syed Manzoorul Islam.

মুহম্মদ নূরুল হুদা

মানুষেরা নদী নয়, মানুষের বরকে তবু নদীর পিপাসা ;

গাঙের পিপাসা নিয়ে বায়ান্মোর যে যুব শোণিত
দ্রাবিড় বন্দীপ জড়ড়ে হয়ে গেলো মানবিক নদী
তাদের পলিতে, দ্যাখো, গড়ে ওঠে অনাৰ্য স্বদেশ,
অনন্ত ঝর্ণার মতো বরকে তার সবুজ মানব ;

নদীর শব্দের সাথে জেগে থাকে মানুষের প্রিয় মাতৃভাষা।

Classfriend

by Satyajit Roy

Translated by Md. Ishtiaque Khan

IT'S quarter past nine in the morning. Mohit Sarker was fastening his tie. Suddenly, his wife Aruna entered the room and said "There's a call waiting for you".

"Who's calling at this hour?"

Mohit Sarker is habituated with reaching office at nine thirty sharp. So the natural response was a frown when he heard about the phone call just before setting out for office.

Aruna Devi said, "He says he went to school with you".

"School!", exclaimed Mohit. "Did he tell his name?"

"He said you know him by the name Joy"

Mohit Sarker left school thirty years ago. There were around forty students in his class. If he thinks hard, he might be able to recall the names and faces of around twenty students precisely. However, he could easily recall Joy or Joydev's face, because he was one of the top performers of the class. He was neat and clean in appearance, he was a good student, he was a high jump champion, he was adept in showing nice card tricks, and, he also once received a medal for reciting the poem 'Casabianca.' Mohit Sarker did not hear from him even once after leaving school. He realized that he had not missed him much for all these years.

However, he decided to take the call.

"Hello"

"Hi Mohit! Do you remember me? I'm Joy-Joydev Bose from Baliganj School."

"Your voice seems different, but I remember your face. What's up?"

"You are a big officer now man; I'm obliged that you at least remember my name!"

"Oh cut that out- Tell me what's going on?"

"Err; I need to talk to you in person. Can we meet sometime?"

"When?"

"Whenever you are free. But if you can make it early...."

"Then let's meet up today. I'll be back by six.

Can you come by seven in the evening?"

"For sure. Thanks friend. Will talk to you in the evening."

Sitting in his new light blue standard car's comfortable seat, Mohit Sarker was engrossed in thoughts. He was on his way towards office. He tried recalling some incidents from his school life. Despite Head Master Girin Sur's hazy looks and grave attitude, their school days were filled with happiness. Mohit himself was a good student. Shankar, Mohit and Joydev—three of them had clashes amongst themselves. They used to occupy the first, second and third positions in turns. Mohit Sarker and Joydev Bose studied together since class six. Many times they would sit side by side in the same bench. They also played side by side in football games; Mohit played right-in, Joydev played right-out; at that time Mohit used to think they would remain friends forever. But they walked different roads after passing school. Mohit's father was a well off person; he was one of the prominent barristers of Calcutta. After finishing school, Mohit got himself in to a good college, and passed out in two years to join a merchandising office. Joydev went to a different city and got admitted in a college there because his father had a transferable job. Strangely enough, soon he realized that he was not feeling the absence of Joydev; he made new friends in college. Then again friends changed when he finished his student life and entered the job life. Now he is one of the top four men in the office, and his closest friend is one of his colleagues. Amongst his classmates, he only comes across Proggan Shengupta occasionally in the club, who also holds a good position in a reputed organization. Strangely, Proggan has no place in his school memories. But Joydev—whom he didn't meet for almost thirty years—occupies a lot of space in his memory. Mohit realized this truth very well whilst reminiscing.

Mohit's office is in Central Avenue. As soon as the car came near the intersection of Chourongi and Shuren Banarjee road, the traffic jam, honking horns and polluted smoke crashed him back to reality from the memory lane stroll. Glancing at the wrist watch, Mohit realized that he would be two to three minutes late today.

Finally, when he finished office work and returned to his house in Lee Street in the evening, not an iota of Baliganj School is present in his mind. As a matter of fact, he totally forgot about the morning phone call; the whole incident came back to him when the butler brought a note to him. The

note was made by tearing a piece of paper from a ruled exercise book and it had these words written on them—"Joydev Bose, as per appointment".

Turning off the BBC radio news, Mohit told Bipin "Ask him to come inside". Saying this, he realized that he should have arranged some food for Joy who was coming to see him after so many years. It would have been very easy for him to get some cakes and pastries from Park Street on his way back from office, but he totally forgot about the appointment. He was wondering whether his wife remembered about the appointment and did the necessary arrangements.

"Can you recognize me?"

Hearing the voice, and then after looking at the owner of the voice, Mohit Sarker had a feeling which can only be compared to the feeling one gets by stepping in to emptiness thinking that there is another step; while climbing a staircase.

The person is wearing an ash colored, non-matched and bigger-than-needed sized cotton pant and a cheap half sleeve shirt; it is apparent from the look that neither the shirt nor the pants had ever been ironed. Mohit tries really hard, but he failed to find any resemblance between the Joydev in his memories and the mouth that is popping out of the shirt collar in front of him. The stranger's eyes are dim, his skin is deeply sun burnt, his cheeks wrinkled, he has whiskers which are at least three day's old, his upper portion of the head is smoothly bald and he has a few locks of disheveled hair near his ears. As he asked the question with a smiling face, Mohit managed to see the inner portions of his teeth and he thought someone with such betel-leaf eroded teeth should always cover his face before attempting a smile.

"I have changed a lot, didn't I?"

"Please have a seat"

Mohit stood up by then. After the stranger sat on the front seat, Mohit occupied his own. Mohit has a few pictures from his student life; anyone can tell today's Mohit from the fourteen year old Mohit. But then why am I struggling so much to recognize this person? How can a person's appearance change so much in thirty years?

"You can be instantly recognized. I would have recognized you if I saw you in the streets"—the gentleman continues talking—"Actually I've been through a lot of ups and downs. Father died when I was in college, and I was forced to quit college. I started looking for a job. You can understand what followed. Good luck and backing are essential elements for a normal person to strive..."

"Will you like to have some tea?"

"Tea? Oh yes, that'd be..."

Cutting him short, Mohit called Bipin and asked him to bring tea, and thought that it's not a big problem even if there is no cake or sweet available; biscuits are good enough for this person.

The gentleman continues, "Throughout the day I've been thinking about the old times, Mohit."

Mohit decided not to tell him that he also spent a significant time looking back.

"Do you remember LCM and GCM?"

Mohit forgot, but he remembered instantly. LCM was P.T. master Lalchand Mukharjee and GCM was mathematics teacher Gopen Mitter.

"Can you remember who forcibly made us stand beside the drinking water tank and pose for a photograph?"

Grinning, Mohit made it clear that he remembers. Strange, all these are true incidents. If this person is not Joydev, then how come he knows all these?

"You know, the five years of school are the best years of my life", said the stranger, "Those days will never come back".

Mohit could not resist saying one thing.

"You and I are almost same age, as far as I remember".

"I am just three months younger than you."

"Then how did you age so fast? What happened to your hair?"

"Struggle, it's all due to struggle", said the stranger. "But baldness is a common syndrome in my family. Both my father and grandfather became bald by the age of thirty five. Wrinkled cheeks are the result of hard work and toil, and also due to poor diet. I don't hold a desk job like you lot. I worked in a factory for seven years, then I became a medical salesman, an insurance agent and then I tried many different types of commission agent jobs! It is not my luck that I will stick to a single job. Just like a swinging pendulum, I'm swaying from left to right, all the time. They say you can make your body absorb anything and everything, but at the end of the day, the body becomes battered, rammed and the end result is premature ageing. You can clearly see it in me.

Bipin brought tea. In another plate there were Shingara and Shondesh. My wife is smart, thought Mohit. However, Mohit dared not imagine what would be his wife's reaction after seeing the likes of his so called classmate.

"Won't you eat?" asked the stranger. Mohit nodded his head in the negative. "I just ate".

"One Shondesh?"

"No, you take it.

The gentleman started chewing on a Shingara and continued talking with food in his mouth—"My son's examination is imminent. But I cannot imagine how I will manage the fees."

That was enough for Mohit. He understood instantly. He should have guessed the reason behind this visit. It's nothing but seeking aid. Financial aid. How much will he demand? If it's twenty-twenty five, it'd be smarter to give, because there is no guarantee that declining will stop this botheration permanently.

"You know, my son is very bright. I lost my sleep thinking that his studies might stop prematurely due to lack of finances".

The second Shingara ascended from the plate. Mohit is constantly trying to match the childhood Joy's face with the stranger's face, and gradually he is getting more and more confident that there is



photo album from his book shelf, opened a particular page and moved it towards Banikanto.

"Is this your school group?"

"We went to the Botanics for picnic", said Mohit Sarker.

"Who are these five?"

"Can't you recognize me?"

"Wait; let me take a closer look".

Banikanto brought the album page closer to his eyes and he managed to identify Mohit in ease.

"Now take a close look at the boy standing at the right side of me"

Banikanto took an even closer look and said "Okay, I saw the picture". Mohit said, "This is the person who just left".

"Did he start gambling from his school life?"—Banikanto grumbled after closing the album with a loud bang and throwing it on the sofa. "I've seen him at least thirty two times in the race course."

"That is expected", said Mohit Sarker. Then he told him in brief the entire conversation within him and the stranger.

"You should call the police", said Banikanto, "Calcutta city has become a depot of thieves, forgery specialists and touts. The boy in the photo album and this gambler cannot be the same person. It's impossible".

Mohit grinned and said "He will understand that I don't believe him after not finding me on Sunday. I don't think he will disturb me again after that"

Eating freshly caught fishes from friend's pond in Baruipur, poultry chicken eggs, mangoes, blueberries, palm and guava, lying in the shadow under trees, playing cards on a mattress laden on grass with a pillow on the chest—all these activities eliminated all sorts of mental and physical fatigue far, far away from Mohit. He returned home at 11 PM on Sunday and heard from his butler that the person who came before came again in the morning.—"Did he say anything while leaving"

"No, sir", replied Bipin.

"Great", thought Mohit. It's a simple trick, but it did the job. He won't come again. The annoyance is gone.

But no, he was wrong. The annoyance was gone for that day, but it returned again the next day morning. Mohit was in the living room. It was eight AM and he was reading the newspaper. Bipin entered the room with another piece of paper. Mohit opened the folded paper and saw a three lined letter.

Dear Mohit,

My right foot got injured, so I am sending my boy. Even if you can manage to give him a very small amount of money, it would help dearly. I hope you will not disappoint me.

Bye,

Joy

Mohit realized that there was no escape. But he decided that little means little and he told the butler "Call in the boy".

Within a few minutes, a thirteen to fourteen year old lad entered the room through the door, approached Mohit and did a small bow as per Hindu religious custom. He instantly moved back a few steps after completing the respect-showing bow. He stood silently.

Mohit deeply gazed at him for a few minutes. Then he said "Have a seat".

The boy hesitantly sat at the corner of a sofa; placing his hands over his lap in a stationary position.

"I'll be back soon".

Mohit went to the second floor, took the key lock from his wife, opened the almirah, took out four fifty taka notes and placed them in an envelope. He sealed the envelope, closed the almirah and came back to the living room.

"What is your name?"

"Sri Sunjoy Kumar Bose".

"There is money in this envelope. Can you take it carefully?"

The boy nodded in the affirmative.

"Where will you keep it?"

"In my chest pocket"/

"Will you take a tram or a bus?"

"I will take a walk".

"You will walk? Where do you live?"

"Mirjapore Street".

"You will walk that far?"

"Father told me to walk back."

"Rather than that, you can do this. Wait for an hour, have some tea and sweets. There are many books and magazines here; you can go through them. I will go to office at nine; the car will drop me in the office and then take you to your home. You will be able to direct the driver towards your home, right?"

The boy again nodded in the affirmative.

Mohit called Bipin and asked him to serve tea to the boy and went upstairs again to get ready for going to the office.

He felt very light and happy with himself.

'Sunjoy' was the 'Joy' he had last been friends with thirty years ago. ❖

PURNOLAXMI'S HUNGER

Jharna Das Purokayostha

Translated by Shabnam Nadiya

THE rumor floated in the air of the *mahalla*. The slum, fenced with bamboo shafts, crawling with worms, heated up at the news. The winter wind snaked its way into the shacks. In summer the heat would rise in waves within the airless rooms. The bodies of young children would become covered in heat rash.

Sometimes some sudden news would arrive in this monotonous life that would rouse the mind, would change the colour of life. One person asked another, "Is it true then?"

"Well, do you think it's false then?"

A curious inhabitant of the *mahalla* asked, "Will Bipin take his wife Purnolaxmi back?"

A *mahalla* elder laughed sardonically. "The things you say. A woman who's spent the night outside her home, can she be let back inside?"

So Purnolaxmi was nowhere to be found in the *mahalla* now. Bipin's wife Purnolaxmi. The face brightened with the vivid vermilion dot of *sindur* on her forehead was lost from the *mahalla*.

It didn't take too long for the news to spread. The whispering continued through the houses. The sounds of whispers, of low voices continued – but the one whose wife was the subject of so much talk – Bipin, just sat there like a statue. The six month old babe wailed. He had wetted the cotton diaper that Purnolaxmi had fashioned with such care. The infant lay on the wet cloth, kicking his legs in the air. Bipin glanced at him for a moment but didn't get up. As if his arms and legs were lifeless.

It was just the other day, she was supposed to visit her sick father in Demra and return the same evening, that was what they had decided. Her father's illness had been severe that day, so she was a little late in coming back. So what? The bus ran the whole day, then just a little way ahead by rickshaw.

Her mother Harimoti had said, "It's late. You'd better spend the night here."

Purnolaxmi had shook her head, "No mother, how can I stay? I've left the baby at home haven't I!"

It was because of the baby that Purnolaxmi climbed into a rickshaw at half past ten at night. Her brother-in-law Laxman was with her. Halfway there, some people stopped the rickshaw in the middle of the road. Knives gleamed in their hands, a few had guns. Purnolaxmi shuddered in the half-light as she thought of something. Her breath caught. How dark it was all around. No light, not a breath of air. Laxman barely managed to ask in a parched voice, "Who are you!"

They hooted in derision. "Hey! The bugger's asking who we are. Listen, we're your father."

How like evil spirits their laughter sounded! That jubilant unnatural laughter sent terrified shivers through Purnolaxmi's body. She called out heartrendingly to people. But no one responded. Laxman became dumb with fear. His tongue was paralyzed. His whole body seemed to have shriveled. Laxman was even incapable of pleading for their helpless selves. Two of them came and locked up Laxman in a room like a black hole.

He lay there all night like a corpse. Then a while later he heard the twittering of birds and the pure light of dawn spread everywhere. He watched the pallid light enter the room. The flicker of light calmed him somewhat.

Bipin said, "Purnolaxmi's gone mad, Laxman." Laxman had noticed it too, the look in his sister-in-law's eyes was not normal. Bipin wept with his hands to his head. Everyone in the *mahalla* came to console him.

The Purnolaxmi who had been ravaged by so many men, was she any longer a woman of the house? She was nothing more than a woman of the streets now. Could she be taken back into the household as a wife? No one would even allow her inside the *mahalla* anymore. If Bipin did take this ruined woman back, wouldn't they kick Bipin out as well?

The community would sit in judgment. Everyone would repeat those filthy things about this luscious woman again and again. They would listen eagerly to the monstrous tale of the juicy female body being ravished, shivering with avidity, enjoying the salacious talk – what shame!

Bipin and his whole family wilted imagining the shame of the *mahalla* inhabitants. This was better, let the woman of the streets remain in the streets.

The hospital let her go once her body had recovered. Everyone shared the joy of Purnolaxmi's return home. But Purnolaxmi's face was ashen. No one had come to take her back.

Where would she go now? No one had come to see her in all this time. When she had been lightheaded with pain, Bipin had come to see her one day with Laxman – she remembered that faintly now. No one else had come. Bokul, Tagar, Parul – the girls who were crazy about her, their *Boudi* – none of them had come to see her, not even once. No one had sat beside her, or stroked her forehead.

She gazed at her body. There was not a single scratch on her body now. Her body had healed, but the stings of a thousand bees poisoned her mind.

A yellow afternoon had descended onto the streets of Dhaka. Tired, Purnolaxmi sat down on the pavement. Her feet refused to move a step further. She remembered the sludge-filled streets of Shankhari Bazar in Old Dhaka. An image of the three-room house floated in front of her eyes. There were so many things her mind wanted to think of. Her eyes grew heavy with tears.

Putul had been just a fourteen year old girl. She was growing gracefully like the slender stem of the lotus. She would wrap a striped sari around herself and walk down the earthen roads of the village to the paddy fields with rice for her father. She had been wedded a few days ago, to an eighty year old almost-corpse.

Was that a marriage?

Purnolaxmi had met her childhood friend Putul when she had gone to her father's place. Unable to suppress her curiosity, she had asked one day, "Putli, how are you?"

Putli had replied in a sad voice, "I'm quite happy. I get to eat, have clothes to wear, spend my nights on a cot. That is happiness. The happiness of being able to put rice in my mouth. What else can the poor want?"

Suddenly she remembered Puti as well. Her parents had married her to such a wonderful groom! They had mortgaged their land, her mother had sold her nose ring to buy the daughter a gold-bordered red sari for her wedding. There was no end to her parents' happiness. They were absorbed in the thought that their daughter would be happy. But who knows what happened to Puti's husband, he became mad with desiring to go abroad right after their marriage. Then he started beating Puti—"Go, get some money from your father."

Puti would snap back, "My father's a poor man, where'd he get the money?"

"What do I care? The son-in-law's going abroad, and they won't give any money?"

Puti shouted, "Yeah, right, your father-in-law'll give you money, what a dream! He's mortgaged the house, sold his bit of land, sold my mother's gold nose-pin – what else is left?"

If she had kept her mouth shut and submitted to her husband's abuse, perhaps Puti would have lived a few more days. Protest only brought on more beatings. Suffering beatings from her husband, Puti coughed up blood one day and died.

Purnolaxmi was a lot better off compared to

them. In the four years of her marriage, she had had three children. There was hardship in their household, but her husband Bipin had been a good tempered man. What an ill-starred hour it had been when news of her father's illness had arrived.

On hearing the news Bipin had said, "Go, take Laxman with you and go see him."

Purnolaxmi had hesitated, "Shall I leave the baby behind?"

Bipin said, "What else can you do? You can't take the baby to a house of illness. Go see your father and come back in the evening."

Who had known that that journey from her husband's house would be her last?

Are women worth anything at all in this world? Did anyone want to hear their very own words? Had anyone wanted to know why Purnolaxmi's home was lost? If someone like Purnolaxmi, the wife in a very ordinary household was lost, did it make any difference to the people of this world?

The world moved according to its own rules. Not a single person wept at how she was lost. The wind did not keen with boundless sorrow, the sky did not shed unending tears.

No one had condemned the inebriation of those young men, the bestiality of the corrupted, barbarian, remorseless men as they brutalized the body of a woman. It was only Purnolaxmi who had lost her home.

She had called upon God with both arms raised to the heavens on that terrible night. In the *Mahabharata*, Duhshashon had ripped off Draupadi's sari – Draupadi had raised her arms to the heaven calling upon Sri Krishna. Draupadi, daughter of the King of Panchal, had wept, "Oh Lord, let me keep my honour".

The Lord had saved her honour. But no one had saved the honour of poor Purnolaxmi.

Purnolaxmi had screamed that night when she saw those ravenous men. "Oh Lord, oh Compassionate One – save me from this hell. Take me to my children, to my husband."

Her body was dirtied from the clawing and mauling of those three animals all night. But no one had come to save her. Purnolaxmi's cries for help had stabbed through that stormy night.

The grey of the coming evening cast a shadow on the yellow afternoon. Thinking of people who were helpless, Purnolaxmi's eyes watered – she felt like spitting on the whole world. They could throw people out of their homes. What they couldn't do was to take her home and give her shelter. Every single man of this society seemed to her to be armless and legless, creatures afflicted – those who could not save their women even with their brawny arms, their muscular chests.

Purnolaxmi stood in the street with dead eyes watching the countless passers by. She looked at the beggars, the poor people of the slums skillfully cooking rice on fires made with three bricks. The rice boiled, the dusty air of the streets grew heavy with the damp odor. Their homes were on the

streets as were their lives. Purnolaxmi was also a beggar. She had lost her home. As this thought struck at her slumbering consciousness, she decided that she would make the street her home just like them. People didn't die in the streets, they lived just like other people.

She stood in the coming darkness of the evening and cried in boundless sorrow. Like Seeta of the *Ramayana*, she exclaimed, "Mother Earth, cover my shame." But Mother Earth did not reply. Purnolaxmi looked with a piercing gaze, no crack had appeared on the earth's surface. Mother Earth did not split in two to pull this unhappy daughter of hers into her lap. Were the stories of the *Ramayana* that she had heard forever all just words then? Nothing more?

Not a single leaf of the shaggy trees moved. The sky did not burst in rain. Sudden deluges did not rage to flood this sinful world. The beautiful world stood the same with light and air.

Purnolaxmi sobbed. Had the soothsayer been mistaken? He had said, "A very fortunate girl." Would the fortunate girl now spend the rest of her days begging in the streets? No one wanted to give her alms. They all snickered at her, made obscene gestures. They winked at her.

"Hey girl, not a bad body. Why are you begging? You'll make lots of money without begging."

Oh, her body! She felt repelled by the abused body of hers. The shameful and humiliating things she had to listen to for a handful of rice.

Who would believe that she was born on the night of the full moon when Laxmi, the goddess of wealth, was worshipped? Her uncle Gajendra had said, "I'm naming the girl Bokul. She is as white as the Bokul blossom."

Harimati said, "My daughter's been born on the eve of Laxmi's Puja. I'll name her Purnolaxmi. This daughter of mine will have rice to eat and spare." Harimati had died as soon as she had heard of her daughter's misfortune. Mother was no longer alive. She never knew, her child was begging in the streets for a handful of rice.

Suddenly a new thought entered her head. What if she went home? As soon as she thought of her home, Purnolaxmi's heart became the river Surma in high monsoon. Lurching with hunger, Purnolaxmi eventually made her way home.

Everything was the same. The *shankha* was being made in the shops. Little boxes for vermilion powder, *shankha*, the carmine *pola*, the *kulo*, the caskets for Laxmi were displayed row upon row, the solemn sound of the conch-shell-saw. Everything was so well known. The familiar fragrance of *Mouri*, *Methi*, *Kalajire* frying floated in the air. Except there was an unfamiliar bride in her own house. The brilliant vermilion dot shone like the sun on her fair forehead. She was beautiful in the milk white *Shankha* and red *Pola* on her wrists.

Everyone crowded around when they saw Purnolaxmi. They thronged around her, talking nine to the dozen.

হায় চিল

হায় চিল, সোনালি ডানার চিল, এই ভিজে মেঘের দুপুরে
তুমি আর কেঁদো নাকো উড়ে উড়ে ধানসিঁড়ি নদীটির পাশে!
তোমার কান্নার সুরে বেতের ফলের মতো তার স্নান চোখ মনে আসে!
পৃথিবীর রাঙা রাজকন্যাদের মতো সে যে চলে গেছে রূপ নিয়ে দূরে;
আবার তাহারে কেন ডেকে আনো? কে হায় হৃদয় খুঁড়ে
বেদনা জাগতে ভালোবাসে!

হায় চিল, সোনালি ডানার চিল, এই ভিজে মেঘের দুপুরে
তুমি আর উড়ে উড়ে কেঁদো নাকো ধানসিঁড়ি নদীটির পাশে।

She asked in a thin, helpless voice, "Aunt, who is that in my house?"

The answer came in a multitude of voices – the bride, the bride, the new bride. Who's going to look after Bipin's house? His children? His family had thought of all this and married him again.

Manik, the toddler, flung himself on his mother's breast. He grabbed hold of Purnolaxmi's torn, dirty *anchal* and started seeking her breast. It was as if Purnolaxmi could see nothing. With dull eyes she just stared at the bride standing in her house wearing the colorful sari. Her husband, he'd remarried in just these few days?

"Who is it, who's there?" Bipin came out of the house.

The bride laughed and said, "It's a madwoman. How did she manage to get inside the house?"

"I'm mad, and you're sane!" In a rage Purnolaxmi kept repeating it in her mind.

As soon as Bipin saw her he shouted, "Oh it's you? Why the hell have you come here again?"

Now Purnolaxmi opened her lips. Desperate, she said, "You want to know why I've come? I've come to take over my house." Purnolaxmi panted. How long she had gone on without a full stomach. The starved Purnolaxmi's body quivered like the cane-plant.

Bipin's eyes reddened in anger, "No, no, just leave. This can't be."

"Why? Why can't it be? Because you've got a new bride?" Her voice trembled. Tears like waves formed inside her breast. In a resounding voice Bipin pronounced, "Yes, that's it."

Helplessly Purnolaxmi said, "So you won't take

Ah, Kite

Ah kite, golden-winged kite, on this overcast
wet afternoon,

Cry more as you fly by the Dhanshiri river!
You cry brings to my mind her sad bet-fruit eyes.

Like all princesses fair, she took her bloom to
some remote land;

Why recall her? Who, alas, loves digging into
the heart to work up woe

Ah kite, golden-winged kite, on this
overcast wet afternoon

Cry no more as you fly by the Dhanshiri river.

Original: Jibanananda Das
Translated by Fakrul Alam

me back? Is that your final word?" As if the wretched plea of a *chatak*-bird in the scorched earth of high summer, the pitiful weeping for rain of an earth rent in drought.

Bipin was startled. "Won't you take me back?" He had no answer to Purnolaxmi's question. Bipin looked at her. He saw a mangled body. A female body soiled with the myriad stains of sin. Bipin felt disgusted.

The neighbours were all standing around. What boundless curiosity lurked in their eyes and faces!

"What, what is it Bipin?"

Bipin felt a red rage. "Why the hell did you come here, you slut?" Bipin pulled Manik away from Purnolaxmi's warm lap.

"Then where am I supposed to go?"

Bipin charged at her. "How the hell should I know?"

"If you don't know then who does? Will I keep wandering the streets? Ain't I your wife?"

"No, you're nothing to me."

Purnolaxmi felt as if the whole world had shattered into fragments, as if there was an unending rain of hailstones on her head. Purnolaxmi looked at the coming days of darkness and shouted, "Why, why won't I get any shelter? Am I a woman of the streets? I'm a slut, a whore. So let me ask, why didn't your brother save me that night!"

An elderly woman spat in disgust and said, "Hey, you slut, how do you show that face of yours to people? Ain't you ashamed?"

"You old hag, the ones who took me away when they found me alone on that dark night, don't they

have any shame?. They closed the door and near about killed me through the night."

"Oh lord!" The old woman shuddered in disgust. "How do you say such things! You've eaten up your shame as well!"

Purnolaxmi wearied of fighting all by herself. She looked around in wonderment. "The ones who did bad things strutted about in public with their heads held high. They went to the marketplaces. They were so unblemished in the eyes of society! No sin could touch them. Only I was dishonoured! How was I to blame? Why didn't brother-in-law Laxman save me? Why does everyone deny me now? Turn me away like a dog?"

Purnolaxmi howled. "They threw me out of my own home. They took away my baby from my breast. Oh, this world. Not a drop of pity inside you." Purnolaxmi wept endlessly as she walked the streets.

Purnolaxmi spent her days in the streets, sometimes eating, sometimes starving. The street was her home. She curled up beside a dog on winter nights. The arid southern wind dried her skin.

One day she had sheltered from the rain in the courtyard of a pinnacled temple. Food offerings were placed there in front of the God in mornings and evenings. A rice offering in the afternoons. The fragrance of *jire* and *methi* fried in ghee hung in the air.

"O Thakur, gimme a bit of rice please." Purnolaxmi pleaded with the Priest Cook. The Priest Cook had no time to listen to the words of a madwoman. The High Priest Brahmin Rameshwar Pundit shuddered when he saw this unknown emaciated woman. Dried dirt whitened her skin, a stench came off her. Rameshwar said, "Don't you bathe, woman? Wearing these old, dirty clothes. Move away, move away, you'll touch me."

Purnolaxmi no longer cried at other people's words, she cackled. As if she was no longer Purnolaxmi, but her specter, normal no longer after losing her husband, her baby.

Purnolaxmi answered the Priest, "The things you say, Thakur! If I whack on your clothes, soil will start dropping off! You're a Brahmin, so it's okay for you. Right, Thakur?" She chortled.

Rameshwar grew angry, "What did you say! How dare you! Move, go on, get away! Isn't there anyone here? Parboti's Ma, Dulal - whoever's around - come here and remove this mad woman."

Purnolaxmi had no one, nothing in this world - only the strictures of society held her. New information and news were printed in the newspapers everyday. People devoured them avidly to learn of new things: of AIDS, the pain of cancer. People could neither survive AIDS nor cancer. Research was being conducted constantly to discover cures for these. But no one wrote of Purnolaxmi's sorrow. She was on the slow road to death. Why didn't anyone want to know about it even once? She had not been attacked by AIDS nor cancer. She was not suffering from any contagious disease. She was suffering from a disease greater

than these. The disease was called hunger.

She had survived like a rice field seared by a drought. She was barely alive. Her chest rose and fell with her breath. But there were no dreams, no plans for the coming days. A depthless sorrow permeated her heart, not even death came near her. Oh death! Purnolaxmi grieved. Even death found unhappy people repulsive. As if the sorrowing were untouchables. In the streets people were crushed by trucks quite often. Day and night people were murdered and dying of disease. Death was snatching people away without any pause. Only Purnolaxmi's life was without end. She had become like a specter from no food, yet she did not die. Only her breath rose and fell from the copper hued dried-out dugs. A hint of warm breath near her nostrils.

"Why don't I choke?" Purnolaxmi shouted. "I ask God, can't he stop my breathing? All he can do is take away a woman's honour, to grab their husbands, to snatch her babies from her breast."

The bells and the *kanshor* rung out at the right times, the offerings were made to the God as usual. The temple grounds were pervaded with the smell of the offering, the fragrance of the flowers, the odor of sandalwood. Purnolaxmi took deep breaths. She wanted some of that mind-calming sweet smell. Her bosom flooded with a serene peace. A great hunger coiled in her belly. She pleaded with the Priest Cook, "Please Thakur, give me a ladle of khichri. You've cooked it with cauliflower and cabbage, haven't you? Please give me some."

Purnolaxmi's starved colorless eyes gazed motionless at the kitchen. The fire blazed a lovely blue on the gas burner. So many different kinds of vegetables, sorted into separate piles. The mixed aroma of *mouri*, *radhuni*, *tez* leaves, and ghee.

In the world, the seasons changed. Purnolaxmi was burned copper by the sun. She coughed and got colds from the constant soaking in the rain. It was on one of those days that she smelled the fragrance of the fallen *sheuli* blossoms in the breeze. The sky was like crystal. It seemed that the month of *Ashwin* had arrived. At the temple the idol-maker began crafting Durga's idol with straw. The *dhak* played di-ding di-ding, incense burned in front of the idol. Flowers were heaped at the feet of the Mother, piles of fruit for the offering. The air was heavy with the fragrance of flowers and fruit.

As soon as Rameshwar Pandit stood up after completing the Puja, Purnolaxmi ran to him from somewhere, "Hey Thakur, why don't you let me go into the temple?" She scratched her coarse, un-oiled hair with both hands. Purnolaxmi's hair was crawling with fleas.

Rameshwar Pandit moved a couple of steps away and said, "Move away, move away, you're touching me."

The Priest Cook came running with a charred piece of wood, "Go on, get out you damned slut."

Purnolaxmi spat and said, "Thakur, you chant the puja hymns don't you. Don't say bad words with that same mouth."

The Priest Cook rushed to attack her. Purnolaxmi ran out to the street laughing gleefully, "Can't catch me, you can't catch me. Those sons of bitches caught me only once."

It was the seventh day of the *puja*. The joyous clamor had died down by then. When the night deepened and grew silent, thousands of old memories grabbed at her. When she had been a child, she had learnt how to knit wool from Grandma Laxmi. She had knitted seat-mats with red, blue, green, yellow wool. After her marriage, Bipin used to eat his rice sitting on that seat-mat. Did the new bride serve Bipin rice as he sat on it? Water in the shining brass glass, white rice on the plate.

The days in her home, of her life with Bipin were nothing more than a dream now. Purnolaxmi had forgotten all the old things. The nitty-gritty of daily life, laughter, song, love – the uncomprehending cooing of her baby – everything had washed away like the *alpna* designs of powdered rice.

As soon as she awoke at dawn Purnolaxmi heard footsteps. In a tired voice she said, "Please give me a ladle of rice."

Somebody snapped, "You whore, can't you stop asking for food all day long?"

Her eyes grew heavy with tears. She hadn't had a bellyful of rice, not even once. No one had offered her a few handfuls of rice with any warmth. Everyone shooed her away. She couldn't even ask for a bit of rice to ease her hunger?

There was Rameshwar Thakur reciting the *Chandi* in a voice of thunder.

Rupong dehi, joyong dehi, joshō dehi, jisho jōhi

- Mother, give me beauty, give me triumph, give me fame.

The Priest's chanting assailed the brooding senses of Purnolaxmi who lay benumbed in the fruit grove by the *pujmandap*. She lay there and muttered, "Oh I'm the only one who wants, huh? I'm the one who wants rice, food. Why you sons of bitches, don't you want anything? You want beauty, want fame, too. And you blame me if I ask for a ladle of rice. Why won't you give me rice? Is the Mother's offerings only yours? Why can't I eat of it? Don't I have hunger? Oh God, you've taken my home, my honour, now you won't even give me rice?"

Somebody had taken pity and left her some pieces of sugarcane and grapefruit, coconut slivers, tapioca, banana, and soaked chickpeas in a banana-tree spathe. Slowly she ate the *puja* offering with exhausted fingers as she lay there. Sometime later she lurched to the tap and gulped down some cold water.

Weary sobs wracked her body. Then a boundless sleep descended on her eyes. Purnolaxmi woke up to a wonderful dawn! A golden sun in the sky, the fragrance of *Sheuli* in the air. They had put up a charming awning of green, red and white next door. The decorators went about their business amid a lot of shouting and yelling. Cooking arrangements were being made by digging the earth in the yard full of huge pots and ladles. Purnolaxmi gazed at the house fervently. It was as if time was

whooshing away. She became inebriated listening to the shouting, the running around, the laughter, the song going on next door. Gradually a yellow afternoon descended. The house next door looked festive with the garlands of light. She called to a little boy playing nearby and asked him, "What's going on at your house?"

The boy replied happily, "Oh you madwoman, don't you know, my sister's getting married tonight."

Marriages and *puja*. Both were joyful. The delight of the wedding on one side, the frantic activity of the *puja* on the other. What joy, what laughter life held! Today the bride would be adorned in *alta*, talcum powder, *kumkum*, *shankha* and vermilion. Baskets of flowers would arrive to bedeck the wedding night. The aroma of frying fish floated in the air. Purnolaxmi's insides twisted with hunger.

"Hey, won't you give me some rice?"

The fat cook shook his spatula at this greedy woman with dirty, ragged clothes, with a mound of hair matted like Shiva's dreadlocks, yellow teeth, her starved thin body.

"Go away, have you no shame? You want rice, huh, well, rice isn't that cheap."

Anger roiled like the sea inside Purnolaxmi's wasted body that had starved day after day, "Why should I move, you bastard? Don't I get hungry? Don't I have a belly? You're the only ones with bellies? Those sons of pigs, sons of bitches, they've taken everything away. Now they don't even give me a bit of rice. If you don't want to give, then don't. I spit in the face of this wedding. You're decorating the bridal room with flowers aren't you? I'm telling you, the groom will be bitten by a serpent like *Lakhinder* on the wedding night. Your bride will spend her days like *Behula*, on a raft, searching the waters." Purnolaxmi was foaming at the mouth from her endless cursing.

Rameshwar Pandit was sitting there after he had completed the *puja*. He noticed Purnolaxmi. A starved, weakling female body. The bellows-like ribcage quivering. A feeble voice, weak with hunger, floated in the air. Suddenly Rameshwar Pandit's heart trembled with pity and kindness. Even the fallen were not outcastes at the Mother's *puja*. Why, the Mother's *puja* was not complete without a pinch of earth from the yard of a prostitute. Pandit's heart ached.

The wedding next door was over. The bride's face, patterned with *alpana* designs painted with sandalwood paste, was awash with tears. Purnolaxmi gazed at her.

A devotee who had come to attend the *puja* asked, "Why are you in the streets? Don't you have a husband?"

Purnolaxmi flared up, "You ask of my husband? So listen, he's here, but he's not here. He was supposed to be the venerated one. One isn't even supposed to pronounce his name. It's sinful to do so. Damned sin. Everything's sin when it's a woman. I'll say his name a hundred times, a thousand times. Who's to say anything? His name's Bipinna, Bipinna. He didn't let me live at his house,

he drove me away. People say, heaven lies at the feet of your husband. Well, I spit on that heaven. I spit on it, spit on it."

Sleep engulfed her early in the evening. In the midst of her sleep-daze, she had a wonderful dream. Her mother Harimati was saying, "This daughter of mine will have rice to eat and spare." Clear, cold water in a shining *kansha* glass. White rice like *bokul* blossoms in a plate of *dudh-kansha*. A pot full of smoking curried fish.

Then the stupor of sleep disappeared and she remembered Bipin. How was he? How was Manik? And Puti? Did he still fall asleep covered by the *kantha* she had embroidered with flowers, birds and butterflies? She fell into a deep sleep again while dreaming of the small shack with her husband and her children.

Lights like shards of diamond were everywhere. The festive night was glittering like flares by the light of the *pujamandap*. The cook was distributing the offerings of this evening, the ninth day of the *puja*. Suddenly Rameshwar Pandit remembered Purnolaxmi. Was she a prostitute? Or was she mad? Had her husband driven her away, why would a woman of her age leave home? Rameshwar Pandit's heart was again filled with tenderness. No one was untouchable in this world of the merciful Mother. He called to the cook and said, "Hari, give some of the offerings to the madwoman. Give her enough so that she can have a proper meal."

A kind of guilt was born in Rameshwar's mind, as if unless the girl partook of the offerings, the Mother's *puja* would remain incomplete. The girl's words echoed in Rameshwar's mind, "Hey, give me some rice and curry, won't you?" No one had heard the silent need, this pleading amid all the commotion of the *puja*.

The Priest Cook walked forward with *khichri*, curry, a slice of lemon, salt, a green chilli and some ghee served on a banana leaf.

"Hey, crazy one, where are you? Get up get up, look at all this food."

The dark place behind the temple shone brightly as the light switch was flicked on. Purnolaxmi lay there stiffly with her ragged body.

"Hey, woman, get up, eat." Hari shoved her.

The mingled aroma of the food on the banana leaf wafted in the air. In the silver light that cascaded from the plate-like moon, everyone saw Purnolaxmi gaze at the sky with motionless eyes. A lifeless body. Was the uncared for girl searching for a drop of human kindness among the bowl-of-milk moon and the myriad of stars scattered like parched rice?

The sagging body of Purnolaxmi, who had left forever with a world of hunger, began to stiffen. Moonlight struck her body like the silver scales of the hilsa.

Rameshwar Pandit moaned, "Mother, oh Mother, you've left us before the advent of the *Bijoya*?"

The *khichri* on the banana leaf steamed for a while, then grew cold. A stray dog arrived from somewhere and licked at the food. Next to it Purnolaxmi's body stiffened. ❖

“In between”

by Farhim Rahman

In an unknown rhythm, an unfamiliar rhyme
The nagging worry of departure continues
Pieces of memories flash through my mind
Like a piano playing some forgotten tunes.

Even now, when I'm done
With the packing, re-checking and loading
I'm aware of something I'm leaving behind
Through my fingers, like sand, its slipping.

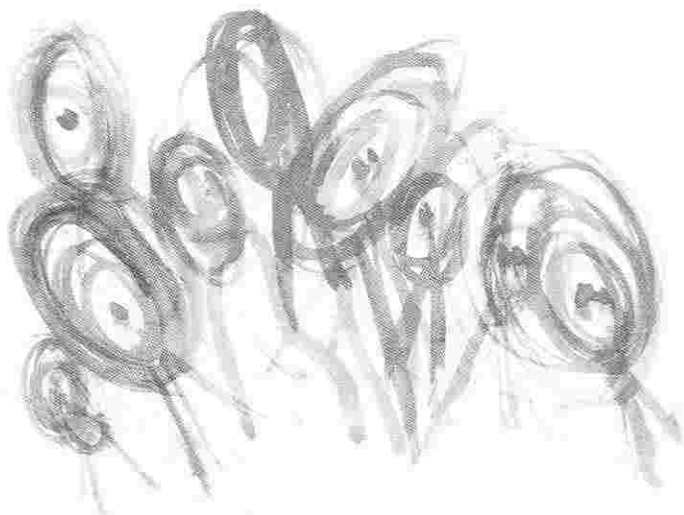
It isn't anything material, I know
Not a book, an earring or the sharpest knife
The emptiness that I feel lies within me
It's a mood, a thought, a piece of my life.

I can see the by-gone years from where I stand
Between the sweet-sour memories, the heart cries
I knew a day as such will be here soon
When the time will come, to break out of all ties.

To welcome the future, we've to let go off our past
The journey of life- that's how it continues
Accepting the bitter truth that nothing forever remains
I've filled my mind with dreams of different hues.

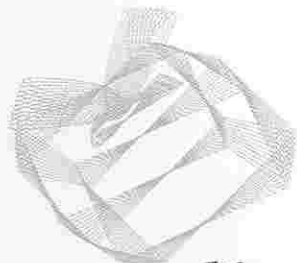
When the sun rose over the dreamy cloud today
Promising a better future ahead
I felt its warmth over my face
From now on, no secret tears will be shed.

Counting days are over for me
Dreams have materialized, don't you see
For all I know, my prayers have been answered
Above everything, today, I'm just happy to be me!



Haiku

by Quamrul Hassan



New Year's Eve
Pandora's box
about to open

Friends waiting
I put on a shawl
late autumn evening

Winter morning
farmer still in bed
record harvest

Lost in introduction

by Adit Rahman



My life has been like the poems (?) that I write, -
 "Lost in Introduction"
 (and a long and tiresome at that)
 dwelling back and forth aimlessly
 between 'obligatory emptiness' and superfluous 'eloquence',
 never getting down to that one true line
 that'd write the rest of the story,
 in impeccable words,
 meaningful, real words,
 words that you can touch,
 and let touch you back.

Mediocrity is such a curse.

The story is never told -
 The book ends with the prologue.
 The song ends with the intro.
 Loves end without promise.

The journey ends with the thought, the ship never sails.
 The day ends at dawn, on the bed of nails.
 The story loops in circles with the same vague conclusion each time-
 "Almost."

Boulevard of broken dreams

by G. Sumdany Don



S

HE occupied very little space in this world. She was invisible, except for the times when the golden rays of early sunlight fell on her face. The steel grills of the window caused stripes of yellow and ebony to appear across her face, reminding me of the flashing lights of an old town wedding. She dipped her long, skinny hands into the white foam where occasionally brilliant silver could be seen peaking out of the bubbles and fighting with the clear water. Her hair was like the rags that the mad neighborhood beggar wore, long, black and unplanned. She held her hair with parrot green ribbons, which came down till her grey skirt. Guarded by thick eyebrows, her dead opaque eyes were as silent as a Bangladeshi pond, black with dirt, dead fishes and floating trunks.

I watched her every morning in silence. She had a magical flavor in her movements. She would kiss the trees of the garden with water or cut the vegetables or squash the round, ripe oranges for breakfast. I managed to move like my own shadow, a dark, silent version of myself, and maintained a

safe distance from her, from where I could see the right side of her innocent face. God must have spent a little more time on her, but then “Why?” “Why did he do what he did?” I asked to the god inside me. Millions of heads are in this world, millions of insects, and millions of gods.

“What are you looking at?” she spoke with a mellifluous voice. “Why don’t you go and look if *Khalu* and *Khalamma* are awake or not?”

I do not remember when she stopped talking. Now she hardly ever speaks; like the plastic round clock on the dirty grey wall of the drawing room that gives a rhythm every twelve hours. Her silence had a hidden melody in it, making me shiver whenever she spoke. I dragged myself slowly and tiredly towards my warm and comfortable sofa, watching her as she nervously looked at the clock. Tick tick tick tick.

“Its 7:00 already?”

I assertively nodded my head. There was a sound of the bedroom door opening and *khalamma* with her belly traveling before her came and stood

in front of the breakfast table. She was wearing a loose black nightie, large enough to fit her monolithic body. She was followed by her pet husband, who was wearing a torn white t-shirt and a *lungi*. Their sight made her nervous, like the face of a crowded village just before the Bangladeshi monsoon rain. She acted strangely, becoming quicker, slimmer, and would occasionally crack the fingers of her hands by pressing them against each other. Her nose sweated and her face showed that a sudden chill had crept over her. I, from a thousand miles away, could feel the wild hammering of her heartbeat. Dhak, dhak. Dhak, dhak. Dhak, dhak.

Sometimes she would tell me stories. Her mouth that usually rests in peace would only open up the casket after *khalu's* shoes had been shined like diamonds, *khalamma* had infused the house with Davidoff perfume, and both had left the house for late night parties...Parties filled with alcohol, music and divorcees. We would lie in the garden then and gaze at the starry sky that flickers like Cox Bazar's sand under the hot sun. Thousands of stars, yet each one is as lonely and isolated as each of us. I rested so close to her brown skin that I could smell the intoxicating urban Bangla in her. Maybe it was the stench of the enormous river Meghna. I watched the small mouse running between the brown stems of the red roses. "Seek the rose along the way; just beware of its thorns" I said to myself.

She said the name of her village was Goalandi, a small heaven with tall trees, dense bushes, mud houses, wild ducks and dengue mosquitoes. She had a decent life with her parents and two elder brothers until her father tripped from the Gasela Mountain and fell down six feet straight under the soil. The local gangster Mubarak loved her, and loved her enough that he threw sizzling acid on her face when she refused to marry him, unlocking the doors of an eternity of solitude. She became a burden for everybody. Society and her family left the burden to rot like the leftovers of a tiger's prey in the Sundarbans; and so did the beauty of the left side of her face. Life to dust, girl to acid victim. Her head was just like the earth, half bright and blue while the other half was dark and just dark. Being desperate and lonely, she limped to Dhaka city for a plate of smoking white rice. There on Gulshan Avenue, where people white with insecurity drive giant SUVs that glitter under the bright blue neons, *khalu* caught her crying loudly. Kind hearted as he is, he brought her home and gave her the damp, windowless black and white room at the acute angle of the house. I still remember how *khalamma* shouted at him, being disgusted by this ugly creature with two hands and two legs, two eyes, two ears but just half a face.

The house was dead. The one storey building stood like a tombstone while the rectangular garden on its face was like the grave. The garden only gave birth to blood red roses. They grew disorganized, augmented with wild hedges and

bushes, tall reeds and grasses. Grey rats peeked from here and there; mongooses zoomed out of the bushes; strange black insects appeared out of nowhere. Black king ants came out of their spherical castles on the powdered soil, hither and thither like castaways surviving on an unknown island. The slave red ants amalgamated and marched towards the house in search of food. At night, cicadas made daunting noises. There were never any buzzing bees or bouncing butterflies in the air. Only hideous crows rested on the roof and splattered their dung on the ground.

The damp, dark house always had all of its windows closed; dirty white curtains constantly hung. Inside, dim 40-watt bulbs were turned on perpetually, even during the brightest of all days, leaving the atmosphere blurry. There were many mysterious rooms in the house, whose doors guarded by thick copper locks, were never opened. Only three rooms were used. We were not allowed to enter the bedroom of *khalu* and *khalamma* and so we spent most of our time in the drawing room. There, old, brown furniture creaked when used. The never-touched books inside the dusty cupboard got soft. A black and white television, whose pictures fluctuated when it was turned on, stood with a grave face. A hoary refrigerator rested at the far end of the room and permeated the house with the smell of stale fishes whenever it was opened. There was only one large framed picture in the entire house. It was of *khalamma* and *khalu*. *Khalu* had a childlike hidden smile on his face while *khalamma* had the looks of a strict schoolteacher. Between them was a little boy who had the color of *khalamma* but was blessed with *khalu's* charming calm eyes and honest looks. I have never seen the boy in the house, nor have I ever heard the couple talk about him.

Khalamma would always misbehave with the poor girl. The words that came out of her small, black, dark heart were as excruciating as the scorching heat of Bengal's July. It was the kind of heat that cracks the soil and shrinks the rivers of Bengal. The deep-dimpled, shady woman talked in a man's voice, shouting and sneering at her whenever she can.

"Why isn't the shirt's collar properly cleaned?" *khalamma* would growl. "Did you use all the detergent to clean your sorry face? You dumb slattern!"

"What? You little bug...you are praying? God hates you! Can't you see that? What? Just got a new way to avoid work, huh? How many *Suras* do you know, you scoundrel? Stop your acting and get me warm water to bathe."

Khalamma often raised her hands to slap her, but fearing that her devout hands might touch the curse, instead she would drag the poor girl's hair and would give it some rough pulls. When her animal instincts were satisfied, she would let go of the hair, kick her on the posterior and push her to one end of the room. The girl would lie motionless on the floor for several hours. I observed with

glistening eyes that later she would slowly get up, get the broomstick and would sweep the floor, searching for her torn, rived hair.

She always had very little food to eat. No extra food was cooked for her; she only survived on the mercy of the leftovers and the old stocks in the fridge. Her life became just like a dead leaf. Living green to dead brown, girl to acid victim. I still sometimes dream of the scenes when she ate dinner after one of her regular beating sessions. She plunged her hands into the cold, bulged rice, mixing in a yellowish curry. Tears ran down her cheeks and stopped briefly on her chin. They then fell on the rice-curry mix, probably making her meal bit more salty.

Her miseries were infinite but her world was just like a very finite dot. But soon she would stop crying. Stopped it forever. She must have been getting used to the tribulations. What could she do? She had no place to go, no laps to place her head and rest, no shoulders to hug and cry. Maybe she decided to pass the rest of her poignant life in this melancholic way. But there was one night which changed everything. A night that erased even the little dot that she had, completely wiping out her existence.

It was raining heavily. Nature was cleaning its beautiful creation. There was a sudden screech from her room. I sprang up impromptu and very cautiously went towards the door, camouflaging myself in the dark. But wait. Was it coming from her room or was it just a thunderclap that I perceived differently as my ears were tired? But then it came again, louder and more terrifying this time, and stopped abruptly. Shall I inform

khalamma? Oh no! She was staying at the hospital tonight. Shall I see if *khalu* heard the sound too? But he must be as usual in his deep sleep, shaking the entire house with his snores. I needed to see what was going on. The door was half opened. I pecked in, but I saw nothing. I stared at the dark vacuum for some time. No! I saw a silhouette moving, moving continuously. I stood there, tranced, in a deep stupor. I knew the shadow. It was the shadow of a very kind hearted gentleman. The shadow stopped its movement; a sound of pain accompanied by a gush of deep stored breath escaped her throat. It was a sound of profound dependency, a sound of losing everything.

The sun was rising over the horizon. The dawn sky showed glimpses of heaven as God rubbed out the stars from his painting and applied deep orange shades on its boundaries. She sat there in silence, leaning her back on the wall. She was gazing out through the window that she must have opened. Her eyes gleamed at the sight of a new day. A bright new day, a beginning of an end. Tears were still rolling down, but she made absolutely no noise. I waited for some minutes listening, but could hear nothing. The early dawn was just perfectly silent. I hearkened again, heeded while her weeping grew less and less; and tears started in my own eyes. I saw her blurry image slowly getting up, making her bed and starting to take preparations for the day's work. I finally understood that she was completely lonely; as alone as the dawn itself. ❖

This story is dedicated to my mentor, Dr Kazi Anis Ahmed, who taught me how to read... Faulkner, Hemmingway, Marquez, Joyce, Chakrav and so on.





Still waters

by Shehzar Doja

i flow to eden on still waters
where mirages beckons me to gardens of plenty

i take my courage and dare to stand on these holy waters
i lose sight of paradise and stand a lifetime away from atonement

behold the visions changes to music i heard and to lyrics i dreamt away as a child
words i did not know and dreams i could not contemplate
i remained lost in those ephemereal dreams
those that remained no longer than a lapse within a another withering dream
i remained a vagabound to my memories
shifting the reveries to where i felt some kindredness

the distance beyond, to the lonely fathoms always seemed
like a second that couldnt wait to come but chose never to do so.
at nights i called out to my fate
pleading and screaming to dream even a half awoken dream
from any straying memories that happened to linger in the freezing waters

my soul needed a requiem for i felt that i had led to many lives
and lost to much love for me to continue
i could not rekindle the visions of my eden
and slowly the water that swayed me towards heaven past the lost watery desert
swayed away to became my still waters



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