

Cyclone

(for Jibananda Das)

THIS is May 1963, in the port city of Chittagong, in the then East Pakistan. It is the morning after the cyclone. I am twelve years old, standing on our front verandah of our house looking down at Momin Road. It is shockingly bright and calm, the roaring noise gone from my ears. A blue, blue, blue sky. Broken tree branches lie everywhere. On the road are buckled shop signs and mangled corrugated metal sheets. Where electric poles have snapped, thick wires hang down. The straggly line of shops facing us across the road is shuttered tight. Only the paanshop and Kadam Hotel, farther down the road near the bus stop between Ahmed's Laundry and Nice Bakery, have opened. A thin line of wood smoke issues from its roof into the scoured, rinsed air. Behind them is the mosque, its weather-beaten dome ash-white in the radiant, sparkling light.

Behind me my father is filing a report for the English-language news broadcast to the central radio station in Dhaka.

"B for bad," he shouts through the bad connection, "A for...for...apple, Y for yet..."

I know he is trying to spell out Bay of Bengal. The bay, across which Arab traders came in ancient times and which at times lent a briny, shrimpy tang to her night air, has dominated the news from here this past week. My father is an assistant news editor of Radio Pakistan. The ground floor of our house is his office, though it will cease operating once the construction of Chittagong's brand-new radio station is complete. We, my parents and I, live in the upstairs two rooms, with airy, sunlit verandahs fore and aft.

"S for salt, P for poisha, E for east..." Speed. This too has been in the news. The view from the back verandah is different. In the distance, a section of an upper-story wall of the spectacular mud house rearing up from the tree-tops like some giant Buddha statue has collapsed. Inside the room I can see drowned furniture floating in a pool of water: upturned cots, chairs, tables.

Trees have been stripped bare of leaves, branches webbed against the low skyline. The thatch roof of our neighbor's kitchen has been blown away. Mangoes litter their backyard. To my left is Majid's house, which, like ours, like most Chittagong middle-class

homes, is a small and double-storied. Except ours is yellow. His is white. Both, like all brick buildings in the town, are peeling and streaked gray from the rain. The madhabi vine on their front verandah grille is in tatters.

The jackfruit tree in our backyard, too, looks forlorn, its fat fruit lying split at its feet. After breakfast I lean over the railing at the back and see Majid standing on their front verandah with his father. I wave to him. He waves back. I tell my mother that I am going downstairs to our front yard.

"Don't go out into the street. Stay inside the gate," she warns me. "All right," I reply, and then run downstairs, through my father's office and the tiny front hall with the maroon rexin sofa set, then skip down the steps to the gate. Outside its rain-rusted bars is the tea-colored rush of swollen gutters. Majid pokes his head over the dividing wall, eyes alight. We share a rickshaw to school in the mornings, bumping over pitted roads behind a tinkling bell, roads that narrowly dip and loop through gently curving hillsides so that riding a rickshaw on a sunny street you could look down to see an elephant dozing in the dappled sand of the road-side below.

"Ready?" he asks. "Yes."

He clambers over the wall and says, "Let's go."

We open the gate, pick our way past the downed wires, then run across the empty road.

"Look," Majid exclaims on the other side, just as we are about to disappear into the lane between the pharmacy and the rickshaw repair shop. He had turned his head for a backward look. "It's Ram."

I turn my head too and see Ram waving to us from the second-story balcony of his parents' bedroom. His house is two doors down from us. Getting ready for school early in the morning, I hear his mother practicing her ragas. "He wants to come too."

I hesitate. Ram is Hindu. But before I can say anything, quick as a hen scuttling across a yard, he disappears from the balcony, reappears at the side door of the eye clinic on the ground floor, fairly leaps down the stairs and runs over to us.

"Where are you two off to?"

"The mosque."

"Why?" "You'll see. Come on." We sprint up the sides of the lane, leaping weightlessly over outside puddles, water sprites skimming on air, whooping, almost slipping and falling yet leaping again. Behind the shops we turn right and race up the steps leading to the low boundary wall enclosing the

We stare at him, tongue-tied, panting. We hadn't expected to run into him, frowningly at work.

"We came to see the owl," I venture a reply.

A sudden light dawns in his eyes. "Oh, the owl," he exclaims, straightening up. Behind him the teenage boy too straightens up to look at us.

my feet, the sodden leaves feel surprisingly springy, like pigeon breast or human cheek. The maulvi comes to a halt beneath the center door and points upward. We follow the bony forefinger to the ledge above, shielded by the roof's overhang, where chunks of cement had long ago flaked off to form a sizable hole lined with rotted planks and straw. And sure enough there in that darkened, cool nook much like the prayer room below is the big owl, alive and unharmed, ruffled and immensely puffed-up, true, but undimmed, his huge claws securely dug into the termite-eaten, pinholed wood, the round yellow eyes in his funny, flat, cocked head regarding our upturned faces with its customary pop-eyed stare. We stare back, filling up with a wordless wonder.

After a while the imam clears his throat. "All night," he confesses meekly to us, "I worried about him."

"So did I," Majid pipes up smartly, "I thought he would fly away and never come back."

I had feared the worst, but now in the brilliant light of this day the owl's feathers are a clean orange-yellow, flecked with dark, mirroring the irises of its tawny eyes.

"Al hamdulillah," intones the maulvi. We look at him. Then, unexpectedly, he raises his palms in prayer. Reflexively, our hands shoot up too. Beside me Ram also lifts his hand, though I know he has never been inside a mosque, that his mother will have a fit if she finds out, that they clasp palms together and bow their heads in puja instead before a rose-petal-strewn altar of kohl-eyed gods and goddesses inside their home. But I say nothing. And as the imam closes his eyes and murmurs the words, I look behind him at the shallow downglide beyond the courtyard's perimeter planning out to a field where wet, flattened grass gleams on reddish mud, at the tin roofs glistening in the distance, and in the sunny, singing air between here and there my twelve-year-old senses feel a deep watery tilt, like the slow glassy heave of the Karnaphuli that flows by Chittagong.



open courtyard of the mosque. Three arched entrances lead into the prayer room. The accordion-style door in the middle is listing from its broken hinges. Inside, we see bent figures are sweeping the floor clear of standing water. The imam of the mosque and a teenage boy are in front of us, wispy figures stooped in the act of cleaning the debris from the exposed courtyard. Wet, black tree stumps and branches, masses of twigs, dark glossy leaves, bearded fern. Long grass, bits of glass, a broken water jar. Crow feathers and bird droppings. Sprigs of berries, tiny orange ones that yield glue for our kites.

"What do you want?" The maulvi, still bent, looks at us. He is surprisingly young.

"Yes." "Yes, it's alive," the maulana continues, fervently pressing both palms against his rail-thin chest. "Come in, you can see for yourselves."

And we do, flinging off our sandals before we enter the courtyard.

"No, no, keep your sandals on. There is broken glass here." He pretends not to notice our half-pants.

And so we put on back our sandals and walk behind his loose, airy, blue cotton kurta to the broken door. Beneath

Extract from short story entitled 'CYCLONE' by Khademul Islam from Six Seasons Review, combined issue Nos. 3 and 4. Published by Mohiuddin Ahmed, University Press Limited.

TALES FROM THE MODERN ARABIAN NIGHTS



The cluster bomb

Cluster bombs have been dropped extensively in Baghdad by the Anglo-U.S. invaders. They are small explosive bomblets carried in a large canister that opens in mid-air, scattering them over a wide area. The bomblets may be delivered by aircraft, rocket, or by artillery projectiles. The CBU is an anti-personnel fragmentation bomb that consists of a large bombshell holding 670 tennis ball-sized bomblets, each of which contain 300 metal fragments. If all the bomblets detonate, some 200,000 steel fragments will be propelled over an area the size of several football fields, creating a deadly killing zone. Because the fragments travel at high velocity, when they strike people they set up pressure waves within the body that do horrific damage to soft tissue and organs. Even a single fragment hitting somewhere else in the body can rupture the spleen, or cause the intestines to explode. This is not an unfortunate, unintended side-effect; these bombs were designed to do this.

Because cluster bombs disperse widely and are difficult to target precisely, they are especially dangerous when used near civilian areas. In addition, they are prone to failure: if the container opens at the wrong height, or the bomblets don't fuse properly, or their descent is broken by trees, or they land on soft ground - they may not detonate. With a high dud rate estimated to be 10 to 30 percent, unexploded cluster bombs lay on the ground becoming, in effect, super landmines, and can explode at the slightest touch. They have proven to be a serious, long-lasting threat, especially to civilians, especially the children, who are sometimes attracted to the bomblets' bright colors and interesting shapes, represent a high percentage of victims. Cluster bomblets become less stable - and more dangerous - as time passes. In Laos, nearly every day people are still being killed from bombs dropped 30 years ago. With an uncountable number of unexploded cluster bombs in Iraq, it could be many decades until the killing is over.

WAITING FOR THE MARINES

FADEK K. JABR
(translated from the original Arabic by the poet)

Twelve years have passed
And the Iraqis are turning over
Like skewered fish
On the fire of waiting

The first year of the sanctions
They said: The Arabs will come
They will come with love, flour and the rights of kinship.
The year passed with its long seasons
The Arabs never came
And sent no explanation for the delay.

The second year of the sanctions
They said: The Muslims will come
They will come with rice, goodness, and the predators' leftovers
The year passed with its long seasons
The Muslims never came
And sent no explanation for the delay.

The third year of the sanctions
They said: The world will come
They will come with manna, solace, and human rights
The year passed with its long seasons
The world never came
And sent no explanation for the delay.

The fourth year of the sanctions
They said: The opposition will come
They will come with victories, water and air
The year passed with its long seasons
The opposition never came.
And sent no explanation for the delay.

The sixth year of the sanctions
They said: We will sell whatever is extra
We will be frugal until relief comes
The year passed with its long seasons
The Iraqis sold all unnecessary things
Relief never came
And sent no explanation for the delay.

The seventh year of the sanctions
They said: We will give up our semi-necessities
We will be patient until we get support
The year passed with its long seasons
The support never came
And sent no explanation for the delay.

The eighth year of the sanctions
They said: We will sell some of our organs
We will be strong enough until the coming of justice
The year passed with its long seasons
Justice never came
And sent no explanation for the delay.

The ninth year of the sanctions
They said: We will sell some of our children
We will sacrifice until the coming of mercy
The year passed with its long seasons
Mercy never came
And sent no explanation for the delay.

The tenth year of the sanctions
They said: We will emigrate
To the wide world of Allah
We will entertain ourselves with hope
Until the coming of the gods' orders
The Iraqis separated east and west
The year passed with its long seasons
The gods' orders never came
And sent no explanation for the delay.

The eleventh year of the sanctions
They said: The best thing for us is to die
We will stay settled in our graves
Until the coming of the day of judgement.

The B-52 and carpet bombing

The monster of the skies, the B-52, much feared in past conflicts around the world, was used for round-the-clock bombing of Iraqi army positions near densely populated towns, especially Baghdad. The trauma to civilians, especially, children, is fierce. The bombers are officially named "stratofortresses". They are known as Big Ugly Fat Fellows, or Buffs, among US servicemen. B-52s were called into action in South Vietnam in 1965 to carry out Operation Arc Light, a carpet bombing campaign against the Ho Chi Minh's nationalists from the north. The B-52 can carry up to 60,000 pounds of bombs, or a mixture of bombs and air-launched cruise missiles (ALCM) in internal bays and on underwing pylons. The bomber's use in Vietnam led to the development of "Big Belly," a large bomb carriage able to hold a total of 60,000 pounds of explosive material. No aircraft to date has been able to rival this capability to wage war. Within six months, Vietnam had been saturated with bombs from more than 100 bombing missions.

Air attacks on a city that treat it as a single military objective instead of clearly distinguishing military objectives and attacking them individually are an example of area bombardment, often called carpet bombing. The destruction of Rotterdam, Dresden, and Hiroshima are prominent examples. The Nuremberg Tribunal did not discuss area bombardment in any detail, and the practice, which flies in the face of all the civilian protections in the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, continued into the Cold War. The U.S. aerial campaigns against North Vietnam particular the so-called Christmas bombing of 1972 against Hanoi and Haiphong were illegal area bombardments.

Letter from Kathmandu

George Bush in New Delhi

SUDHANVA DESHPANDE

From: Bela Malik
Reply-To: Bela Malik
X-Priority: 3 (Normal)
To: Khademul Islam
Subject: an article

Dear Khadem,

I'm enclosing a piece written by a friend Sudhanva Deshpande, based in New Delhi. He is a director, actor and script writer with a well-known street theatre group called Jan Natya Manch (Janam).

The play was actually performed in New Delhi on 22 March 2003 as part of the anti-war protest. The protestors shouted colourful slogans, carried slippers in their hands, and cheered the play lustily. The play was originally scripted in Hindi, and had songs that took off from popular Hindi cinema, but then was staged in English.

With best wishes,
Bela

A large demonstration was held today, on 22 March 2003, at the American Embassy in New Delhi. The demonstration was going on expected lines as speaker after speaker condemned the American action in Iraq, till a most unexpected event occurred. A spokesman of the British High Commission arrived and wanted to address the protestors. The organizers graciously extended permission to him to do so.

The protestors, however, were very angry at this and determined not to let the man have his say. Chaos reigned for several minutes as the protestors shouted the man down. For a while it even seemed that the whole thing would turn ugly and violent. Wiser counsels prevailed, however, and the man was allowed to speak. I report below, verbatim, his statement:

"Ladies and gentlemen, the American embassy is very concerned about your protest gathering. President George W. Bush himself has been following these protest gatherings across the world. We are all very concerned. I am a spokesman of the British High Commission. I have been sent here in order to explain the American position to you.

"Actually, Mr Blair wanted to come here himself. But there are too many protests across the whole world, and there is no way that he can be present at every one of them to explain Mr Bush's stand. So he sent me instead. You see, Mr Blair is very loyal. More loyal than the king. He has even proposed to amend our national anthem to 'God

Save the King'.

"We are very concerned. We are concerned that you are denying America's democratic rights. The real test of any democracy is the rights accorded to minorities. President Bush is always very concerned about the rights of minorities. He is therefore delighted that even though Mr Blair has won the vote in the House of Commons, he is clearly in the minority in the Labour Party as well as in Britain at large.

"Indeed, President Bush himself is also very much in the minority. Because while the anti-war protestors across the globe number millions, he numbers only one. Some claim that if judged by intellectual ability, he numbers zero. But this is a disputed claim, and we have no intention of sending UN inspectors to find the truth, since you will appreciate that it is highly embarrassing to discover an empty warhead right inside the White House.

"As I was saying, President Bush is very much in the minority in the world, in the Security Council, and indeed in America itself. In fact, he even won his election by minority. As the head empty or otherwise of the tiniest minority in the whole world, you will appreciate that it is President Bush's democratic right to bomb Iraq. I am sure I don't have to tell you the reason you can read between the pipelines.

"President Bush is very concerned about this protest. Indeed, it is my great privilege to inform you that he has decided to come all the way to India to explain his stand to you. Ladies and gen-

tlemen, please welcome President George W. Bush."

The large crowd of protestors was shocked and awed. A hush descended on the scene. Someone started singing a song to welcome the great man.

George Bush, We Salute You!

Welcome President, we salute you
We salute Your Excellency
Your essential decency
Your inadvertent coherency
Oh living necromancy
We salute you!

We salute your democratic vision
Your total hate of reason
Your vivid confusion
Oh logical delusion
We salute you!

We salute your actions inept
Your capacity for imagining fact
Your illogical concept
Oh weapon of mass deceit
We salute you!

We salute your daddy's commandment
A dutiful son in government
Iraq's democratic bombardment
Your alibi of disarmament
We salute you!

We salute you without comment
Oh empty head intelligent
We salute you without hesitant
God save our great President
We salute you!

As the song ended, President Bush took the microphone. He had a gun in his hand. Reproduced below is his speech, word for word.

"Hi. I don't have a written speech. I asked my Vice President to write one for me. He refused. He's a real dick. He said, 'Mr President, you don't need words. So long as you have a gun.'

"Now, you may wonder why I have come here with a gun. You see, before coming here, I phoned my daddy. I said to my daddy: 'Daddy, I am going to India.' My daddy said to me: 'Be careful son. You are from the wild west. Beware of the injuns.' I said to my daddy: 'Don't worry daddy. I never underestimate my adversity.'

"Sorry. I got that wrong. I mean I never underestimate my adversary... Sorry. I mean I always misunderstand my diversity... Sorry. I mean I never mistake my synchronicity... Sorry. I mean

I never underestimate my idiocy... Sorry. I mean... you know what I mean.

"But don't be scared of this gun. It is not a weapon of mass destruction. Those are for Saddam. I bring here only weapons of mass deception.

"I am very concerned about your protest. You believe that Iraq has no weapons of mass destruction because those inspectors could not find any. They are stupid. They are blind. They kept looking in factories and military establishments, when the weapon of mass destruction was right there, all along, in front of them. Saddam.

"I know that world opinion is against this war. So I called my advisors and I said to them: 'The rest of the world thinks we are wrong.' Dick didn't know what 'think' is. Colin didn't know what 'wrong' is. And Donald didn't know what 'rest of the world' is.

"This war is not against a country. This war is not against a religion. This war is to destroy weapons of mass destruction. This war did not start with Iraq. And it will not end with Iraq. We are committed to fight this war across all continents, in each and every country on this planet. Because, you see, there are weapons of mass destruction in all countries of the world.

"Now you may wonder at that. But let me tell you, we have deep and broad evidence. The CIA has compiled a big fat dossier on a new weapon of mass destruction that is being assembled in a million different locations across the globe. Just this morning I was talking to Tony, and he told me how this weapon has terrorized his party. He says some terrorized ministers have resigned from his cabinet. Apparently even his best cook has resigned.

"Now, that got me thinking. I said, what's cooking? And as I sat there thinking it hurts, I admit, but I do it every once in a while that Spanish fella called me. What's his name Aznaro, I think. Or is it Pizzaro? I know it's not Picasso. That's the singer. Anyway, he said many members of his parliament have been terrorized by this weapon. Then that Danish chap forget his name called to say that his face was reddened in a terrorist attack. And that Aussie you know who I mean called to say he can't use his front door any more for he fears a terrorist attack using this weapon of mass destruction.

Sudhanva Deshpande is a playwright, actor and director with the New Delhi based street theatre group, *Jana Natya Manch*. He can be reached at desdsu@rediffmail.com.

Bela Malik is a book editor based in Kathmandu