

SHORT STORY

A Floral Emblem

BRATYA RAISU
(Translated from Bangla by SAG and KI)
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Flowers in hand, he comes calling when night descends. I see that he's smiling. So I too smile back. Asks how I'm doing. And when I ask him his name he replies 'Foolish'.

'How long have you two been married?'
She stops laughing. 'Six years.'
'No issue?'
'He's got problems.' She looks away from me, and then down fiercely into the flowers in her hand.



'Sounds like you're in a romantic mood today, Mama.'
'These jute plants growing tall, can you tell why?'
She says she does, then leans to whisper words into my ears that would have turned my forehead's brains, let alone mine, to mush.

I join my palms before her and plead ignorance, 'You have to excuse me, but no. I live on the wrong side of the tracks. Though it seems like I have seen you somewhere.' Which, the last line, is just pure crap. Never seen her before.
'Might I ask your name?'
'C. Konka.'
'I see. Great name. I've heard of it.' I place a stick of tuberose in her hands. She folds it seven-eight times and slides it into her pocket.

TRAVEL WRITING

And while last week Fakrul Alam went on vacation to Indonesia, this week another, and very different, Bangladeshi (a photographer/gearhead in loosekurtapyjamas) flings himself headlong into Singapore to arrange a photography exhibition. With very different results.

Juggling, juggling, juggling...

SHAHIDUL ALAM
I was getting closer to my usual time of arriving forty minutes before departure. The Singapore Airline guy had warned me to arrive three hours early. "The new computers..." he went on. I assured him I had flown several times since the new computers had been introduced at Zia. I had been there on day one, when these glistening new machines had led to long queues as confused immigration officers tapped in a letter at a time and constantly consulted more computer-savvy colleagues about the entry of some insignificant data.

lines were looming. Salgado's images needed to be sourced, the workshop in Prague needed to be settled, and there were Pathshala exam sheets to be marked! I tried to get as much done using the museum connection. Even with these fast speeds, paying 15 Taka a minute at the hotel, took a bit of getting used to. The 15 Taka an hour Dhaka cyber cafes didn't seem so bad after all!

friends had been mobilised to research the PDA phone scene. What was available, where could we get it, who would give the best discount and who was going to accompany me to ensure I didn't get ripped off. I also needed a local person who would get the account on my behalf, as the phone company needed a local address.

Thursday was the big day. The opening was in the afternoon, and we still had plenty to do. Sandwiched between interviews, captions, a final edit and lighting adjustments took up most of the next day. Still no PDA phone. What was I going to do? Eddie suggested second-hand phones. Singaporeans apparently change phones every 2-3 months. A six-month-old phone was passé. So we should have been able to find a very good deal on a decent six-month-old set. The press had done their job, and friends whom I hadn't been able to contact, came over as they had seen me on TV. I had to sneak off to the computer several times as MC was breathing down my neck: were my exam papers marked yet? Some of the photographers had brought in their portfolios in between. Would I have time to review them please? It was going to be another long night.



Society. It felt so long ago.
The next morning Nick and I went for a recce to Bugis. The salesman was quick to spot the techie freak and impressed me with the virtues of the operating system of the OX2. The Nokia and the Ericsson didn't stand a chance, and he was going to give me a special deal! I did have the judgement to take the time to consult my friends, and do some further research. Ed had mentioned scouting the Saturday papers where the best deals were to be found. But the salesman had done his job, and I was well and truly hooked.

Monica Ali denied Bangladeshi visa
On roots and moments of triumph

KHADEMUL ISLAM
HOW can this be? How can Monica Ali be denied a visa to visit the land of her birth?
The answer, at least partially, has to lie in our London High Commission's colossal ignorance about the vast gulf that exists between mere hired hacks and a genuine writer, between dozen-a-dime journalists and a hot young novelist who's pushing Bangladesh to the forefront of fiction writing, an ignorance finally about the influence of celebrityhood in our satellite-stitched, global news culture.

moments of our triumph that our roots beckon the most. The pull is the strongest then. We should respect it.
Everybody knows that, except of course our finest, our thin blue line-- ever so up on the latest things, so very much on the mark-- in that sorry High Commission of ours.
One has to wonder, why would the term 'writer' bring about such a paralysis of judgement on the part of our government? Why this spasm of fear and anxiety?



tioned crucially in the West. They have that strange power of a universal language, they have access to influential audiences worldwide, they can shape national images, the face we show to the rest of the world, in a way that is inconceivable to the dull minds inhabiting the upper reaches of rickety Third World states. Writers such as Monica are not toothless. They can sting you for decades. In other words, the very thing the present government wants to control, its image, may be the one it is least able to defend from an angry, popular writer. The whole world knows about the evils of the Narbada Dam simply because one seemingly frail, 5' 4" woman named Arundhati Roy got pissed off about it. More dangerous to the ex-Soviet Union than missiles in a certain sense were two men named Solzhenitsyn and Nabokov. So it is in the present government's basic self-interest to do the decent thing and give her that damn visa.

where you are going. Still, the experience of having done this many times before did help, and with my eager volunteers, we were slowly getting the exhibition into shape. Gim Lin stormed in and out, pressing a row of panic buttons. The counters were having problems with the inkjet prints. The precise positioning of my large prints needed my immediate attention. The television interview needed to be scheduled in, and what could I not eat?

printed in Singapore. The technicians interjected in between: What did I need for my presentation? What program was I going to use? It all seemed so serious!
I managed to ring Justin. The last time we had met was when he had come over to Pathshala with David Wells for the workshop that led the lead story on Aramco magazine. Since then I had seen his Dhaka pictures in Time magazine, and I remember that ex-minister Abdul Mannan, during an earlier flight to Dhaka from Kuala Lumpur, had waxed lyrical on his slide show on Bangladesh. Justin was off the next morning to Shanghai, so that night was our only chance to meet. Eddie dropped me there and after a few mobile calls (how did we manage in the Dark Ages

used for immortalising on celluloid my ear-pulling session. The photographer was fussy. We had to stand in front of the aquarium, and crouch a bit so he would have the right composition. Not too much movement, as it was a slow shutter speed, and could the tester crouch too? At least my mother had not raised me for nothing. My one offering to humanity could be the pleasure I had given to so many Singaporeans as they chuckled to this spectacle. Oh how I waited for their turn!

It was refreshing to see so many photographers working into the early hours, who were mounted, trimmed, adjusted, hung the photographs. It reminded me of the early days of the Bangladesh Photographic

The Female of the Species

Gauri Deshpande



Sometimes you want to talk about love and despair and the ungratefulness of children. A man is no use whatever then. You want then your mother or sister or the girl with whom you went through school, and your first love, and her first child -- a girl and your second. You sit with them and talk. She sews and you sit and sip and speak of the rate of rice and the price of tea and the scarcity of cheese. You know both that you've spoken of love and despair and the ungratefulness of children.

Gauri Deshpande is a noted Indian poet who writes in English.