

SHORT STORY

Crow Home

MANOSH CHOWDHURY

(Translated from Bangla by Khademul Islam)

THE eagle is soaring serenely above us. The sky seems to be a mix of dust and smoke, laced with an urban haze: something gray, something muddy, not blue at all. Maybe it had been blue once. Now it certainly isn't the 'sky is blue' of school composition books of yesteryears. But though it had been gray, yet one could at least glimpse the whole sky. Now that the eagle is up there, however, it is quite clear that even that old gray sky--not blue--has been chipped away at, with Dhaka's horizon hemmed in by high-rise buildings. There is no way of knowing how eagles feel about flying in such a sky. Or whether they even care about anything else except floating in the air. And these days I, along with many others, for a lot of different reasons am out of touch with one who knew all about flying eagles, Jibananda Das. Yet when that eagle flies above us it kindles something. All those who inhabit the surrounding horizon-splitting high-rises come out onto their balconies and verandahs to watch it. Whether to welcome it or simply to watch it soar it is impossible to tell. Their upturned faces, their distant gazes, the flying eagle seemingly the only object worth watching in the whole wide sky. And then suddenly from all four corners flocks of crows appear, feverish, cawing, darting in raucous circles around the eagle. Their cries startle the people gathered in their balconies. And hearing their screams, it gradually dawns on us that the crows are hostile to the eagle. We don't know what to do. All the while, the eagle calmly floats above us.

2.

There had been the usual crowd at Tiananmen Square. People with their different purposes, just like the crowds at Gulistan. Same as the restless hordes on Dhaka's footpaths. Talking, incessantly talking, nonstop, with an obvious need to talk. The material world resides in the space created by words, a world identified by the names given it. The crowd at Tiananmen Square too talked, perhaps could not avoid talk of the murders that had been committed there. Words that no doubt had to be uttered lightly, surreptitiously. Tourists from the North could not avoid it at all: Tiananmen was defined by the killings that took place there. And what got overlooked in the din were the display trays of hawkers, their wares, their magical secrets. But our photographer friend hadn't missed these things, his eyes and his camera were his trade. So he had quickly spotted the cigarette lighter in one such tray--with a bright red Mao stamped on it. And when pressed, it played a tune--the march of the Cultural Revolution. Even though he was a nonsmoker, he had brought it back with him. And he had also brought back a kite with its string wound around a wooden spool. An eagle made of a silky fabric, crafted by precise hands, an eagle that looked live, strung onto a spool coloured a fiery red. Which he holds in his hands now, with his eye peering not into a camera but fixed on the eagle above. Giving it his rapt attention. Just like the way he looked with his camera, or even outside it. We too--'we' meaning I and my friends--have our gazes fixed on the eagle.

3.

We are ignorant of where crows live, and hardly ever care about it. At least I didn't. We see them going about their daily business--busyfaced, ever alert, in bunches. We have seen them in the mofussil towns we grew up in and then left behind, as well as in Dhaka's rare coconut trees, a fact which disturbs us today. Today, when a hand deftly handles the bright red spool and flies this almost-real eagle and all of us now roof-topped people have left our houses and apartments to come close to it. So what if it is an eagle made of silk? But the crows cannot tell the difference between a real eagle and a fake one. And their screaming and screeching breaks the eagle's thrall over us. What the crowd on the balconies and rooftops think of the crows--I dare not venture a guess. But the crows are mad, emitting wild shrieks, without let up. Incessantly.

4.

Then even more crows appear, till gradually a seemingly

uncountable number circle over our heads. They keep flying. And cawing, fiercely, relentlessly. Then get tired, or perhaps in order to hatch a new strategy, fly over to roost on those very roofs beneath which are the balconies bursting with onlookers. They do it in relays, with groups defending the skies while others catch their breaths: a busyfaced, vigilant collective. They stay clear of the eagle, unwilling to come to close quarters with it. It becomes abundantly clear to us that the crows, their sheer numbers and the crying and wheeling and circling, are displaying fear and anxiety. The threat of displacement and dispossession has terrified the crows. The eagle is immune to it all. But by this time we know, and a thrill runs through the people jammed on the balconies. A sporting contest in the sky! All those verandahs become seats in a stadium. There is no way of knowing if the crows are aware of it. And then suddenly a couple of them venture forward boldly to peck at the eagle, protesting their threatened loss of home, at their being uprooted.

5.

The crows keep on flying, screaming about loss and exile. Countless, innumerable. Over our heads no longer is there an empty patch of sky. A whole universe of crows! It shocks us, assaults our senses. Especially mine. Where do these crows live? What is this unearthly demonstration, this vivid protest, about? How strange! But, truly, what else would we want to defend if not our homes? And yet, it is only when the crows protested that we start to think about their homes.

'Cuckoos don't build nests. Crows do. Cuckoos gather in the spring. They gather around us, and also among themselves. This getting together leads to mating, after which the cuckoos look for a home to lay their eggs. And Nature leads to crows' nests, where they lay eggs. The crows, we do not know why, think of these as their own eggs. They sit on them and provide warmth, which is essential to all life--for crows, for cuckoos, for us. Cuckoo hatchlings then wait for wings to fly away from their crow parents, parents who are the providers of warmth and shelter. One morning, when wings can be spread to float the body away, cuckoos leave their homes, their crows, either all at once or one by one.'

How the eagle is connected to all this I do not know.

The story is deeply mysterious. I do not know why the cuckoos do not pick the homes of other birds, and how, or why, those crows' nests are left unprotected at that particular time. This line of thinking, about unprotected homes, about where and how these nests are, is dispiriting. Is there something particularly attractive to cuckoos about these homes? Do they ever fly back to give thanks? To these very nests? Again, there is no way of knowing. We live in Dhaka city, even today, even this day when the crows are gathered, leading to this story of cuckoos and crows, a story about being foolish on one hand, and sly on the other. What do we know about the domestic lives of crows? About caring? About the pain of dispossessed children?

6.

My mother had told me to get a brightly-coloured trunk. My father had wanted the same. Decorated with pretty flowers. Just like the one they had had these many years beneath their bed, wrapped in an old lungi. Full of bric-a-brac collected over the years. Or could have been valuables, too. My mother kept it under lock and key. I hated the thought of going to Dhaka accompanied by a trunk with flowers painted on it. It was hideously embarrassing, like thorns caught in my flesh. I wanted one painted a single colour, the kind issued in those days to army jawans. We put an order for one of those at the shop. The shopkeeper remained indifferent to my choice; in fact, it was easier for him to procure a mono-coloured, black trunk. My father and I, both of us holding down the black trunk, brought it home in a rickshaw. Afterwards the trunk rode



Graphics by Shamim Chowdhury

again, this time bouncing on the roof of a bus. A locked trunk on the long road to Dhaka, carrying within it my childhood and boyhood in a distant mofussil town. Just sweetly dark, without any flowers on its sides. And from then on I counted Dhaka city as my own. Such a long time back. Yet today, though I take unwilling trips down memory lane, I can't recall where that trunk went. Maybe I left it in a former home, but which one I can't remember.

7.

People on verandahs watching the spectacle seem tickled by the crows' fear of being uprooted. They after all feel safe; the homes which have these balconies and verandahs are secure homes. Secure, and yet, not-so-secure. Because here ownership of these flats is a serious matter. It is different in the case of the sky. But to inhabitants of the earth, to human beings, who are hardly ever in the sky--not all of them, anyway, and not for a long time, merely a few of them at any one time--land is a major concern. Wherever they are living now, they are likely to remain there for some time longer. Depends on whether they own it. I know, as do others, that actual owners are small in number, and in this sense of renting their homes are insecure. And all those people who crowd the terraces and verandahs live in these flats whose heads are stooped in front of a Dhaka sky. They will keep on living in these high-rises with their heads bowed down. In Dhaka. They do not face eviction and loss of homes. Merely movement, from this house to another, from one home to another. In this sense they are perhaps secure. Shifting houses is not uprooting. The houses here are interlinked, and changing them is merely a walk across the road, a little tread. Eviction and uprooting, toss-outs and refugees, these are the narratives of an entirely different people. Or of crows--who on this dying afternoon have left their busy-faced, manifold daily tasks to chase an eagle, even one spun out of silk and bamboo.

8.

The children of settled households constantly leave Dhaka. The more affluent the home, the more steadily the children, especially sons, go away. Sons, and sometimes, daughters. They fly away and later call home, or send emails, to say that they are fine, that they are not coming home, that they now want to live over there. The next time they explain why they want to stay away from Dhaka. And then before finally settling down, they say that if they now lived

in Dhaka their bodies would itch, their children would get sick and vomit. Furthermore, since they are now bound to banks--steady clients with a strong line of credit--it would be most unwise to go back. And please, they further plead, how much could they possibly earn in Dhaka. And after all these phone calls and emails, whether their parents stand at their windows, or on their balconies and verandahs, and standing there look at crows, and want to just have a chat with them, talk things over--I have no idea about these things. These are not easy questions to answer; in fact, the answers depend on whether these balcony-people are friends of crows, or of cuckoos!

9.

The eagle is tied to a string, which is wrapped around a flame-red spool, and behind it hands. It is brought down. All around us the light is fading to dusk. Kite-flying time's up. We friends descend from the roof of the apartment. Our urban home! So many homes under a single roof, houses with mosaic, a mosaic of houses. We then disperse into our own individual flats for the evening. At night I write a letter to my mother, who would sit down to read it in a little house, in a small mofussil town:

Ma, it's been a long time since...remember that black trunk? I lost it. Tell baba to get me another one from the shop. When I visit you the next time, I'll take it back with me. No, I do not need it. I'll just keep it thinking it is the other one...Ma, did you ever go back to your old ancestral home, that village somewhere in Barisal? Didn't you tell me once that nobody lived there now? That even your old widowed aunt had passed away. Would you like to go now? I think if we looked hard enough, we would find it. I am sure someone would welcome us into their home. On the way back we could even drop by Baba's old village along the Khulna road. It would be just for three or four days. Do you want to go? Let me know...Don't forget about the trunk, please. This time I won't be able to stay for more than two days. Keep well, then.

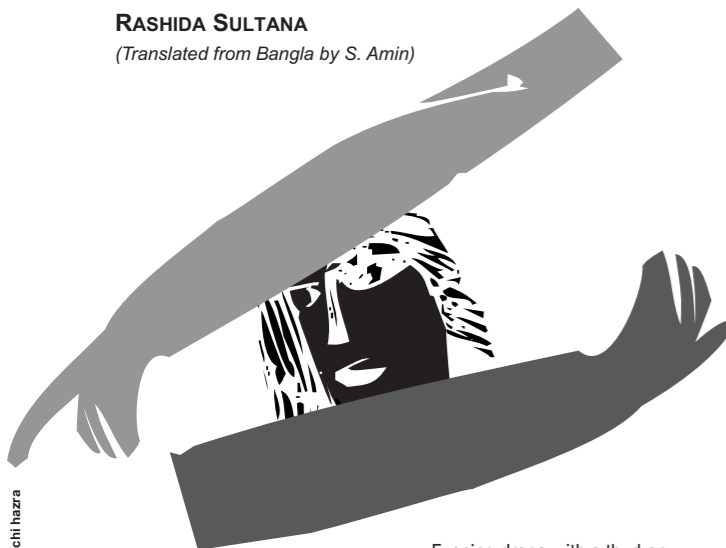
Yours
'Crow-son.'

Manosh Chowdhury teaches anthropology at Jahangirnagar University. Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Tete-a-tete

RASHIDA SULTANA

(Translated from Bangla by S. Amin)



Evening drops with a thud on tamarisk leaves
Tears roll down abruptly from eyes
A cool breeze scatters all around its touch
Dew falls, and wet becomes a blue sari

Every secret laden in the wind tumbles out on the banks of each river and every sea
It's all the fault of this rain-smoothened weather.

Rashida Sultana is one of Bangladesh's younger women writers. S.Amin lives in Iowa.

Edward Said my mama-shoshur

ELORA SHEHABUDDIN

I was in New York earlier this week to attend Edward Said's funeral. I joined the hundreds of tearful mourners from the front row, watched my husband help carry the casket, listened to Edward's son Wadie read a warm, funny, touching eulogy, listened to his daughter Najla read Edward's favourite poem, the Greek poet Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians"...yet deep down I still cannot believe that Edward is gone. Others have written eloquently in these pages about Edward the intellectual and the champion of the rights of the oppressed. I want to focus therefore only on a few personal memories.

I calculated this past week that I knew Edward for exactly ten years. I first met him in the fall of 1993, as the uncle of Ussama, a friend in graduate school. A couple of years later, that friend became my husband and Edward Said my mama-shoshur. I had of course "encountered" Edward Said some years earlier, across the formidable pages of *Orientalism* in a college seminar; after all, few students in liberal arts programmes in the United States complete their degrees without encountering Edward Said's texts. My graduate studies at Princeton overlapped with Wadie and Najla's undergraduate years there and Edward and his wife Mariam would drive down often for Sunday brunch with all of us at one of the handful of restaurants in Princeton. I still remember how nervous I was going up to NYC to have Thanksgiving dinner at the Said's, I think my first meal with them....I wondered, could I possibly survive an entire meal at the same table as the great Said himself? What I discovered that afternoon and was confirmed over the following decade was that Edward was also a human being, with a wonderful sense of humour and vast knowl-

edge of the world. Indeed, his immense erudition made it easier for him to converse with a wide variety of people as did his firm belief in focusing on commonalities rather than differences between individuals and between peoples. At some point along the past decade, he dubbed me "the Bengali Bulbul" and the name stuck, despite my protests that Bulbul was my mother's name and that it was therefore highly inappropriate, according to my understanding of our culture, that the name be applied to me.

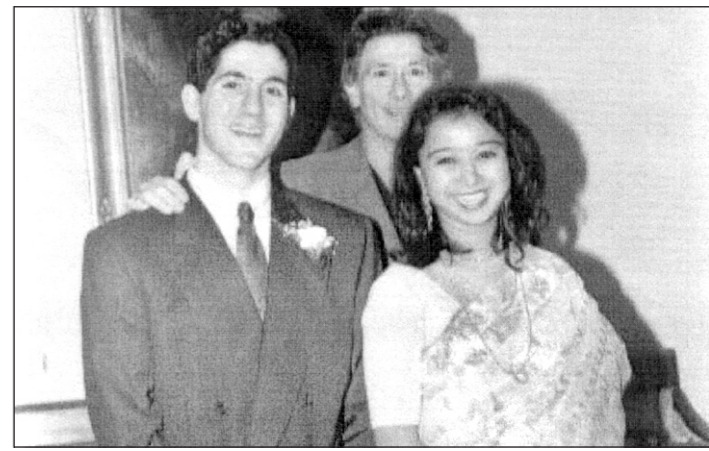
Ussama and I got engaged in Paris in the summer of 1995. Edward was in Paris that summer, living alone and writing in a friend's apartment. My parents organized a small dinner to celebrate our engagement and Edward joined us as a member of the *bor-pokkho*. When I greeted him, I noticed his rather unusual tie. In the place of dots, paisley, diamonds, or some other such familiar pattern, his tie sported tiny snake charmers. I looked up at him, a look of puzzlement on my face. He looked back, clearly waiting for me to figure it out. I did and with all the mock indignation I could muster, exclaimed, "I see...we are your Orient!" He chuckled mischievously, clearly pleased with himself for having been able to find "just the right tie" for the occasion. Ussama and I got married in Princeton that November and of course the Said's drove down from New York for the event (with the exception of Wadie, then in Egypt). In the years that followed, we shared many meals with Edward, formal and informal, and saw him address packed halls in Houston, Cairo, California, London, and Beirut. At one of the conferences in Beirut, I was fortunate to meet his dear comrades Egbal Ahmed and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, both of whom also passed away in the last few years.

Edward was truly a star in both the academic and activist worlds, yet he defied stereotypes about

both these categories. He was never absent-minded, always impeccably dressed, and never too big to be hurt by personal attacks. He wrote beautifully and without the jargon that plagues the work of many academics. This rendered his academic writing accessible to educated individuals outside his field and his more political writings to readers all over the world. Edward was indeed larger than life, both to the outside world and within the family. He loved life and he loved his work. He wrote, lectured, and traveled relentlessly despite his illness and did so until the last possible moment. He cherished his clothed tailored shirts, handmade shoes and savored good coffee, fine food, and dark chocolate.

Edward and I would often speculate terribly seriously for this was hardly a serious matter about which of us had completed the Harvard-Princeton sequence in the "right" order. He had attended college at Princeton and completed his Ph.D. at Harvard. I had done the reverse. Another favourite topic of conversation was the peculiarities of South Asian English. He would also occasionally, half-seriously, ask if I knew what Gayatri (Spivak) actually did with the poor rural women she met on her visits to Bangladesh and discussed in her work.

Edward was already aware of his illness when I first met him ten years ago. Over the course of this decade, he had several difficult spells and painful treatment sessions, yet he always managed to pull through. When he became extremely ill two weeks ago, his wife and sisters realized that this time seemed different. Sitting in Houston, we received hourly updates on his deteriorating condition, yet neither Ussama nor I were ultimately prepared for what seemed increasingly inevitable. On Saturday morning, we flew up to New York to be with the family and at-



Ussama, Uncle Edward and the author

tend the funeral. And what a funeral it was. Politicians, activists, writers, academics, and relatives from the Arab world, Europe and the United States, gathered to pay homage to this man who had touched their lives, hearts, and intellects in so many different ways. The fabulous lunch that followed the service was catered by the same woman Mariam had recommended to us for our wedding in Princeton. The active participation of Edward's good friend, the Israeli pianist Daniel Barenboim, in the funeral service was testament to Edward's remarkable ability to reach across seemingly insurmountable barriers. That same evening Barenboim recorded an interview with Charlie Rose, a self-avowedly intellectual talk show host on public television; it was broadcast three days later, on Thursday night. Charlie Rose began the interview by repeatedly describing the friendship between Edward and Daniel as surprising, as a friendship between two men who could not be more different. This was yet another example of the U.S. media's inability to see the world except in terms of irreconcilable differences, a tendency Edward had always criticized and struggled against, calling on all to focus instead on the "traces" that we share with one another.

I last saw Edward in London in mid-May. We were on our way from Houston to Beirut and Dhaka for the summer. We had dinner together at his sister Rosemary's apartment. I am glad that our one-year-old son Sinan had this opportunity to meet his great-uncle Edward, even if he did not at all appreciate the significance of the encounter! It makes me sad that Sinan will not have a chance to know Edward the man except through the stories we tell him. One thing is certain though: he, like countless others, will get to know Edward W. Said the consummate public intellectual through his writings, documentaries, and recordings of his speeches. And I sincerely hope that he will pick up where Edward was forced to stop, and speak the truth and fight injustice, even in the face of overwhelming hostility--as should we all.

Elora Shehabuddin teaches women and gender studies at Rice University, Texas.

The Daily Star Literature Page Short Story Contest

The Daily Star literature page invites short stories from its readers, domestic as well as overseas. The winning entry will be published and awarded a prize of Taka 3000. The story must not exceed 2000 words and should be printed/typed. Multiple entries by the same person is not permitted. The sole judge of the contest will be the literary editor of The Daily Star. While the story can be written in any genre they must be set in Bangladesh and have Bangladeshi characters. Ideally, the submission should also be interesting at the level of language. If there is no clear winner the contest will be held again at a later date. The last date for entries is November 30, 2003.

All entries must be sent to The Literary Editor, The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka-1215. Email entries should be sent to dseditor@gononet.com, atten: literary editor.