

SHORT STORY

Dancing Shadow

JIBANANANDA DAS
(translated by Khademul Islam)

Spent many days gazing up at the sky. Outside...but then had to come in!
Said goodbye to the sky...didn't even feel like looking at it, at all that light. It startled me...to look into the face of that naked light...that huge sky...
Windows and door shut tight.
Lying in my bed.
Reba is massaging my temples.
I had asked her to do it. I do wheedle her a lot.
Even if there is very little response nowadays.
"It won't do if you massage that gently."
Reba doesn't reply.
"Try a little harder."
"Yes, just like that."
I look at her face.
By twisting my neck.
"Yes, just like that, right...that feels good...ah, yes..."
When, twisting my fingers, I fill the glass with whiskey...that too feels good...to me.

If you want to wring something from the earth, first you have to tear open its bosom. Never did get anything there...well, maybe two fistfuls. But the cost to get that, the hurt...the wound still gapes!...Suddenly I don't like getting my forehead massaged anymore. The more she expends of herself, the bigger the risk of my getting bankrupt.
"Stop...you don't have to do it anymore."
It is as if she hadn't heard me.
"Reba...that's it."
Only now does she get up.
Stands...winding her key-chain...relieved at having been spared further massage?
I too am spared. I am a little breathless.
Looking from behind the thick lens of my spectacles at Reba's face I feel a jolt of recognition...I and she.

How we are getting tangled inside a web of trivia.
Will it ever end?
I force myself to sit up.
The veins in my forehead throb. As if my whole head is being torn off. I tie the handkerchief very firmly around my head. As soon as I open the window a shaft of light from the street outside hits my eye.
I can't look out...have to step away.
Unbearable, that much sky.
Tiptoe over to the bed.
Reba is not there...when she left I don't know.
And doubtless is not returning.
Unless I call for her, she doesn't come much...even this little tidbit of information I find tiresome to think about.
What cannot be...I love to dwell on it.
Unless I first mix daylight into the colours of darkness I can't bear to look at it.
Reba does not come.
I sit up.
Go over and stand in the verandah.
She is giving the beggar-boy a bit of hot, starchy, freshly-cooked rice ladled out on a fresh *shaal* leaf...hot, white-foamy rice, along with a bit of unsalted curry.
Well...very good!
Stare at them for a long time.
One who is so kind...everything is possible with such people!

The beggar-boy eats...Reba stares at him fixedly.
The Reba I had glimpsed inside the dark room...I liked this Reba infinitely more.
Standing there I get pins and needles in my legs.
I limp back into the room...
...Okay, can't this woman be freed...from this cage of a house!
Of course...of course!...
But the bars of prison have been constructed out of my own ribcage.
My skull throbs. I can't think any longer.
Don't even know when I fell asleep.
The night lengthens.
Moonlight through the crack in the window.
A plate of covered rice on the floor.
Feel very hungry...get up. Slowly lift the cover and peek inside. Such a neat arrangement! The shiny plate. The glass gleams. The floor sparkles...the sitting area swept so clean!
Who has done all this, I know.
Why has it been done, that too I know.
Yet it doesn't raise my hopes...in fact, deepens my fear.
I start to loathe myself.

Even if I did make it out of my ribs, yet a cage is still a cage.
I eat.
In the next room somebody's breath rises and falls, very evenly!
I don't feel like eating anymore.
Sounds as if somebody is scratching at the ear of the earth.
But not finding the courage to speak to Man, with Man more rotten than dirt!
I get up while still eating. Stand at the window. Even that late at night somebody enters the room! Indistinct figure.
...peering through my thickly-lensed spectacles it seems to be...
kunimashi. Her shadow came to a dead stop on the moonlit floor.
'*Mashima*'
'Yes, I came to speak to you. What's going on, all this eating this late at night? And on top of that, so much left over...you didn't eat much, did you?'
A very distantly-related *mashi*.
Reba's mother...*kunimashi*.
She is looking intently...at the leftovers, mumbling mantra-like to herself...this sixty-year-old woman.
'*Mashima*'...I am startled by the sound of my own voice. What I wanted to say...*Mashima* said it herself.
'Reba won't have a roof over her head...Ugh! A man and a woman living in the same house, yet the priest won't come to bless them!...Sleeping next door to each other...night after night!...'
Somebody has cut off my tongue. I am not allowed to speak.
Mashima drones on...of so many things...no way anybody can remember all that. After a long time I say 'It cannot happen.'
That I manage to say this much is enough. No need to talk anymore...
Mashima replies, 'We'll leave tomorrow...go wherever the eye goes.'
And just the way she came in, she tiptoes out.
She had been coming in twenty times a day. Talking about so many things...spreading so much stuff about her daughter.
My head was drooping from this daily feminine assault. Reba had never taken part in it, though. She saw truth as much larger than lies. Perhaps that was the reason why.

The poet comes...wearing a silk panjabi, dangling a gold chain...long locks flowing...with whatever youthful restlessness he can muster.



Don't invite him to sit down. He himself pulls up a chair.
Says, 'Which of my poems did you like the most?...The one I wrote about...Darkness', right?'
I answer, 'I didn't like any of your poems...the poem I'll like the most is the one I'm writing myself...'
He leaves after attending to a few other matters...didn't seem at all fazed by what I had said.
The hunger that builds in the breast, that does not want to die easily, no, not at all...
Yet as far as is possible I try to go about avoiding Reba. Which is why she dares to come sit by me.
How daring she has become!
Clasping my two hands in her two hands she draws me near and lays her head on my chest...if any living thing could live on unflinchingly embracing her father's corpse, it is this...nothing else.
I knew that...knew it all along.
Yet, don't like the fact that by mistake I could arrive at the wrong idea.
But over these last few days all my wrong ideas are falling away, one by one...
And since then Reba has not been trampling on my shadow.
She never ever loved me.
Nowadays, drawing her sari veil tighter, she is edging away from me, desperate to get away.
What fear! What loathing!...

The doctor comes. A lad dressed up as a sahib.
Takes one look at our home and turns his face, his eyes, away. Dusts his 'suit' seventeen times in five minutes. Sees my cheap, coarse clothes and feels shame. Rubs the sweaty back of his neck, eyes, nose, face with a handkerchief, and then somehow fits himself within the narrow confines of the life he views before him.
...Yet he comes...daily.
Right when day comes to an end and shadows darken the sky, right then. Just as suddenly as a shadow...
Says, 'Let me take a look at your glasses.'
Take them off and slowly hand them over.
'My God, very thick lenses indeed, your eyes must be gone.'
'What else...?' I chuckle back at him.
Twirls dances spins dangles my glasses while talking away at me, lecturing, explaining.
Don't understand.
Don't listen, either.
Just know that he's going on and on.
Just that!...

Returns my spectacles.
I ask 'You done?'
'How did the eyes go?...Must have gone from a very early age.'
'What's gone?'
Looks at me as if his disgust knows no bounds. A diseased corpse passing itself off as a live human being...it's like he can barely tolerate this insult to humanity...
Before I can say anything further, Reba comes in with tea.
Cup is cracked; the saucer, too.
Reba feels more ashamed about it than even the doctor. She can't figure out how she can possibly excuse herself from this scene.
Reba is talking a lot...
Through my glasses stamping down my hungry soul I take a quick look at the two.
They don't see me looking.
It feels good to rest my body against the flaking-plaster wall.
Like this.
The doctor isn't getting up...nor is Reba.
He's got the prize after so many days.
They talk, talk, interminably.
With my eyes closed I think... 'What you're saying I can say it too...everything; Far better than you ever can...I can say it...no matter what I've become, I can let myself go in a way that you can't...that you never can...'
The more they heat up, the more they naked they get...feel the more numb they are getting.
Who are they to me!...
This is their love!...
If only they had allowed me to love!...

'He's fallen asleep,' Reba whispers.
Silence for about a minute.
Then the sound of kisses...
Both fidget...
Finally, everything is silent...
Cold enters the dark room.
Whether it is terrible or beautiful.
I do not know.

I call Reba to my side and look into her face...
I have it, I have it, I now possess hope.
That day when she offered the beggar-boy the foamy rice on a *shaal* leaf, even that day her face wasn't as bright as it is today...no one...this cannot by any means be terrible! This is beautiful...supremely beautiful!
Reba asks, 'Why did you call me?'
Her voice...it is as if the caged bird is free. I too have gotten back the sky.
Gotten back the sky's light...all of it. Light is greater than darkness.
Much greater.
Nothing is higher than the sky except truth.
'You were calling?'
She flings herself on top of me. Fear, disgust, loathing, hatred--it is as if she has risen a good deal above these.
'Were you calling?...two pairs of eyelashes would have become one if they were any closer.
Before they can come closer Reba has to leave... Just like this...'

Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) is Bengal's foremost modernist poet. Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star. This story appeared posthumously in the little magazine *OruKto*, in 1956. As far as possible the original punctuation has been faithfully followed.

TRAVEL WRITING

A glimpse of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, fried crickets, the Aztec temples by moonlight, the Museum of Anthropology, Trotsky, and rush rush rush, visas visas visas...there's running around and then there's *real* running around, there's visa problems and then there's *real* visa problems, we all know that, but you want to find out about some *r-e-e-a-a-a-l* downhome gut-twisting visa troubles and running hard enough to beat the band, you just set yourself down some place nice and comfy and read the piece below by photographer Shahidul Alam...

Mexico Revisited

It was in the early 90's that Pedro wrote to me. I had only heard of this famous Mexican photographer, a pioneer of digital photography and author of the first photo essay on CD ROM, "I Photograph to Remember". It was a gentle, intimate and deeply perceptive essay on the last days of his parents, who were dying of cancer. I remember the image of his father looking as if he could fly. He was then bringing out his new CD, "Truths and Fiction" and wanted me to write an introductory text, something about my responses to the new digital technology. We didn't have email then, and faxes were expensive, but nevertheless we began a dialogue that continued on far beyond the CD, or his subsequent books.

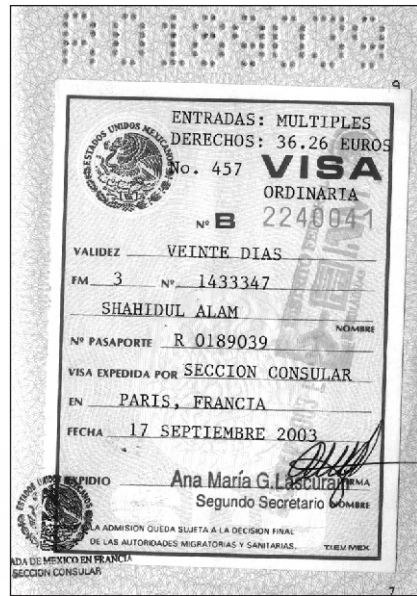
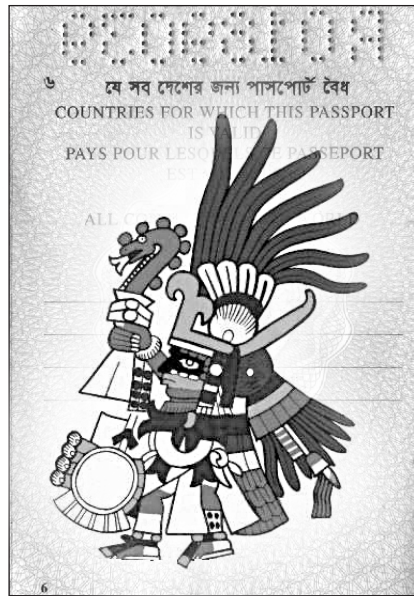
My first opportunity to visit Mexico came in 1996, when the Centro de la Imagen invited me to speak at FotoSeptiembre. As is still the case now, there was no Mexican embassy in Dhaka. Even the foreign secretary--a good friend--was unable to extract a visa application form from the nearest embassy in Delhi, let alone a visa itself. So I fell back on Plan B. I flew to London. The consul general at the Mexican embassy there had heard of me and wanted to help. We exchanged phone numbers as I then flew off to Fotokina in Cologne, loathe to hang around in London while the bureaucrats decided what to do with me. The good consul phoned me in Cologne, and asked me to take the night train from Germany in order to arrive in time. Groggily, I made my way from Waterloo station to the consul office. True to his word, he had wrangled a visa. Just in time for me to race to Heathrow and catch my flight to New York and on to Mexico City.

Being the only African or Asian in a huge meet--a photography festival held every September, i.e. 'FotoSeptiembre'--with over 800 individual exhibitions should have been daunting, but my naiveté

helped me overcome such inhibitions. I was thrilled by the work on display in this amazingly culturally rich city. Manual Alvarez Bravo (one of the legends of photography, friend of Andre Breton, Cartier-Bresson, Diego Rivera, Trotsky) turning up on the day of my talk should have been enough. Reaching across to the next table over dinner to chat with Gabriel Garcia Marquez should have left me sufficiently awed. But I was too excited to be fazed by any of this. I remember most vividly the trip to Oaxaca that Patricia Mendoza, the director of Centro de la Imagen, had organised for a few of us. It was a small but interesting group. Fred Baldwin and Wendy Waitriss, who ran Fotofest in Houston, Alasdair Foster (this was when he ran the photo festival in Edinburgh and before he became the director of the Australian Centre of Photography), and Marcelo Brodsky, the president of Latin Stock from Sao Paulo, made up our distinctly diverse team. We passionately argued, and fervently planned, charting out the routes that we felt photography should take. I remember well those torrid moments, but my most distinct memory is of the midnight visit to the Aztec temples that Patricia had managed to organize. The temples were off-limits after sunset, but Patricia knew everyone there was to know in Mexico City, and had arranged for us to go on a full moon night. I walked along the ancient corridors of the shrine, glistening in the moonlight, in the quiet and eerie stillness. Bats flew, owl hooted, and the lights of a gently glowing Oaxaca sparkled in the valley below. There was Francesco Toledo, sitting on the red clay, chatting to other artists. I could see him just as easily squatting in the dried-up pond in Charukala, or in Modhu'r Canteen, passionately debating the merit of some work of art. This was the artist who had raised millions and donated his

own work to set up some of the finest museums and galleries all over Mexico, while, sadly, I couldn't imagine the directors or the DGs of our own institutions coming out of their dull-carpeted offices with towel-backed chairs and touching the earth with such sincerity.

I came back from the trip with memories of brightly coloured shawls, hibiscus and tamarind drinks, the blue beans and the fried crickets--a Mexican delicacy, quite tasty, somewhere between fried



shrimp and crab to the Bengali palate, and which go down particularly well with a tamarind juice drink. So when Pedro asked me to speak at the 10th anniversary of *zonezero.com* in September of this year, I could hardly refuse. Of course, there was still no Mexican embassy, and no guarantee that I could pull off the previous visa trick again in London. The world, as we all know, had changed, and Pedro was loath to have a bearded Muslim negotiate with immigration officers in the 'land of the free'. So this time around it would be Paris! Pedro arranged for a direct flight to Mexico City from Paris, and sent a

very official looking letter with lots of stamps to the Mexican embassy there. I was emailed a copy. I was going to Prague enroute, so two visas had to be wrangled. Luckily Martin Hadlow of the Media Development Loan Fund in Prague, and who had invited me there, knew the ambassador in Paris, who knew the ambassador in Bangkok, who spoke to the consul-general in Kuala Lumpur, where the Czech consulate gave me a multiple entry visa immediately. Which still left the Mexican visa

rusty French, I worked out that 16th September was Mexico's Independence Day. Luckily, I had kept a margin and had resisted purchasing my other tickets until I had my Mexican visa. Dominique from Contact Press recommended their travel agent, who was very helpful, but scratched his head over my itinerary. A Paris-Prague one-way came to over \$1,200! A return would work out cheaper, but I needed to include a Saturday night. That meant missing out on my show in Groningen in Holland--of 'finger-in-the-dyke' story fame--since I wouldn't have time to go on to Manchester and then to Oldham and back to Paris in time to catch my flight to Mexico City on Tuesday morning. No way, Jose!

Eventually we managed a Paris-Amsterdam-Prague-Amsterdam-Paris ticket that was reasonable, and good old Easyjet from the nearby cybercafe provided a Paris-Liverpool-Paris flight at a quite good price. All I now needed was that Mexican visa. The visa officer I met

the next morning, on the 17th, was very pleasant. Pedro had provided an imposing-looking document, with several stamps. The sort bureaucrats love. Gauging that they would issue the visa, I hesitantly asked how long it might take. "48 hours" was the short reply. I was in trouble. All my budget price tickets were non-refundable and non-endorse-able. Besides, I'd already killed two of the four days I was meant to have for this meeting in Prague. Luckily, I had my itinerary with me. The sight of eleven flights, two train journeys and four car journeys across ten

cities in three continents over fifteen days should have been enough to convince the visa officer that I was certifiably insane, and shouldn't be allowed in any country, but it worked, and she agreed to let me have the visa in an hour (my flight to Amsterdam was in the afternoon). Then there was the minor matter of the visa fee. 134 Euros to be paid in cash. I gulped. In these days of electronic money, I rarely carried cash with me. No problem. I had my travelers checks. I told her I would be back in a jiffy with the money: Could I have my passport please. "Sorry," she answered, "we need the passport to process the visa." Logical enough, but I was stuck again. I combed all the banks in the neighbourhood, but they wouldn't give me an advance on my credit card without a passport. Eventually I found an officer in a bureau de change who decided he would take the risk, and cashed my travelers checks without a passport. Run back to the embassy, collect visa, rush to Sylvie's, jump on the train to Garu du Nord (Charles de Gaulle airport doesn't have a left luggage), pick up luggage, and finally, armed with visas, tickets and passport, dash for the plane. Paris, Amsterdam, Prague, Amsterdam, Groningen, Amsterdam, Liverpool, Manchester, Oldham, Manchester, Liverpool, Paris. And then on to a lovely night walk across old Prague. Drew arranged the Liverpool-Manchester-Oldham circuit, and Lotte and Anonna, joined me in Groningen, where Maria and Ype gave me a grand tour of the Norderlicht (the Northern Lights) Museum. And then there were two of my own shows: one in a synagogue in Groningen and the other in Gallery Oldham that I had gone to see.

Mexico was all that I had

expected it to be. Great speakers, old friends, wonderful presentations. My own session was unusual. There were only two speakers as opposed to the customary four. Brian Storm, Bill Gate's right-hand man at Corbis, versus me, a panjabi-clad Muslim from a small agency in Bangladesh! Techno power versus bravado! It was the classic duel between corporate and anti-establishment thinking over the politics of photography usage, over corporate control of images versus individual photographers retaining control over their work. The gallery loved it. I don't think Gates will be interested anytime soon in a takeover bid for our Drik company in Dhaka! It was again at Pedro's on the eve of the talk. Trish, his wife, was leaving for New York the next day, for the judging of the Eugene Smith Awards, and she'd arranged this quick dinner. Mark (senior curator of Victoria and Albert Museum in London) and I were the only guests. Pedro took us for a walk along Coyocan. We went down the streets where Frida Kahlo and Trotsky used to live. Checked out Cortez's palace where Pedro and Trisha were married, and soaked in the energy of Pedro's bustling *para*.

Then it was onto Mexico's Museum of Anthropology. What a museum! Having taken in some of the more famous museums around the world, I felt I had seen it all, but this one simply took my breath away. Apart from the sheer number of exquisite exhibits on display, I was enchanted by the love and care that had gone into setting up the display. Each piece of stone was carefully positioned, thoughtfully lit, and displayed as a prized possession, which of course they were. The tombs descended down an intricate stairway, with sections cut out, so we could visualise our descent into the burial grounds. Lights carefully placed at floor level lit up small artifacts that characterised the personalities of dead. Tools

for the rites of passage, a child's toy, a garment to take one across the border between the living and the dead. The walls, the floor, the ceiling, the distant vision, each had a role to play in this wondrous display. On the morning of my departure I sneaked off to the Koudeka show. Hanging around the Palais Bella Artes, waiting for the doors to open, I made rapid notes of what was left on my 'to do' list. Gifts for people back home! I was in trouble. But Koudeka was having none of this. This was an exhibition that could not be rushed. The sheer versatility of the man was amazing in vision. And then to see, in his latest reincarnation, images with such mastery of tones, such splendid play of forms, such freshness of vision, was simply mind-blowing. Then, still reeling from this visual feast, I dashed to the alleyways at the back of the Sheraton. There were no ponchos that I was supposed to get for T*, so some Viva Zapata! T-shirts and the odd Mexican trinket would have to do. Then it was goodbye to Pedro and onto the plane.

I stopped in Paris long enough to drop in at Reza's and pick up the CD for the calendar we were bringing out. Sylvie had arranged an assignment for me with Geo, and having taken over the Contact Press Office, I asked the writer to visit me there. Michel Szulc Krysnovsky had just returned from his assignment in Dhaka where Drik Pathshala student Sunny had worked as his fixer. He brought his portfolio over, and we talked of exhibition possibilities. Robert gave a copy of his latest book, on the Cultural Revolution, for R* and me, duly stamped with his new Chinese signature. A few hours sleep at Sylvie's and it was time for the airport again. I would have three whole days in Dhaka before heading off to Taipei. Bliss!



Shahidul Alam heads Drik Picture Gallery in Dhaka.