

SHORT STORY

Dhaka Dusk

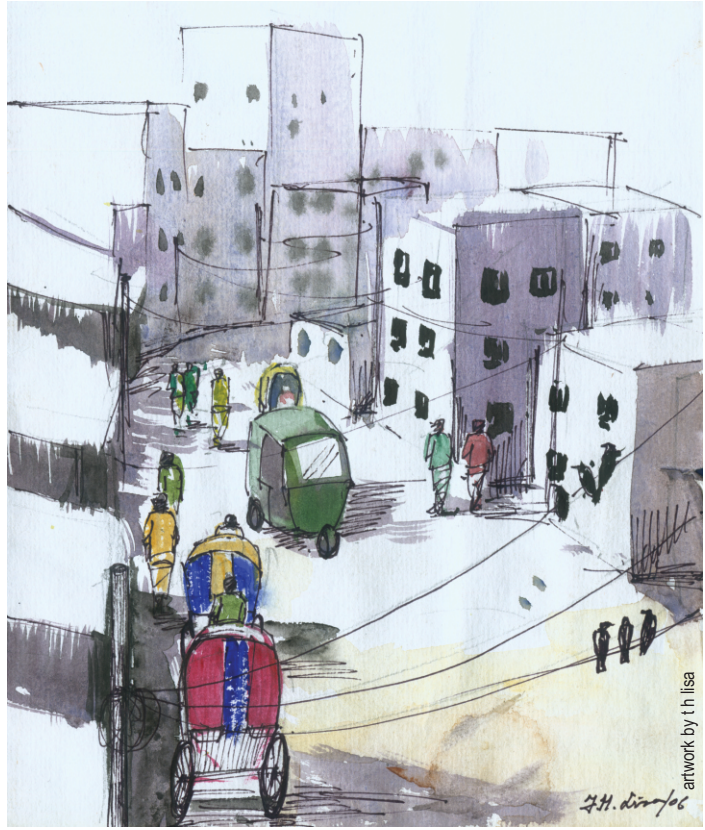
ABEER HOQUE

***** Slow heat, 107F *****
Did you know that you could find solitude in the scream of crows at sunset?
My grandmother's jongol garden has pockets of it between the banana trees and bougainvillea laced with the heat and frangipani mirrored in the silent green pond

Blast Jane's Addiction over muddy cobblestones and look up into the darkening sky slashed by electric lines
You'll find it there. Very nearly perfect.

This isn't the summer of my childhood. Muri isn't my constant companion. I can't skip all the afternoon teas and dinner parties and shopping trips to play outside or swim in the pond. My grandfather doesn't come back from his morning walk with hot and spicy daal puris for breakfast. He is not walking with me through the garden, tearing off banana leaves and folding them intricately, precisely into "watches" with bands and everything, his bent curly head mirroring my own. Nana has been dead for seven years, but it is only now that I feel it, now that I'm here in his house again, walking through the wild garden, crooked banana leaf watch on my wrist. My only context for him is fading from my already faded memory.

But Nana is here, and she has always been the centre of my Bangladeshi experience. Her shuffling walk, her wrinkled hands, the way she croons, *Nanu, Nanu* as she hugs me, harder, longer than I expect. My tiny grandmother is a force, a woman of reckoning. One of the first Bangladeshi women to graduate from college and go on to get a masters degree, she has spent her life in pursuit of miracles, not the least of which includes the education of village girls. Nanu travels from village to village, walks through the grey concrete classrooms with their empty windows and brackish chairs and desks, talks to headmasters, teachers, and parents to finds the girls who have escaped infanticide and child-bride-hood. She has spent decades fighting to keep our dark-chocolate-cream-skinned, bony, lithe, huge-eyed daughters in school. This place, it is your home, my father told me before I left, in our only exchange of substance since our last fight. I hear his voice as I watch wordlessly through the rickshaw curtains at this fiercely alive and pungent city, breathing its last, its first with every gasping breath. Past the water stained buildings, the broken down roads,



the paradises of green fields. You have roots here, his voice echoes. The rickshawallah's stringy calves pump and pulse under his skin, his eyes bright in his tired face, old enough to be my grandfather. What my father didn't tell me was that the years away would leave me stifled by silence, a stranger in my own country. My words halt and stutter, my childhood vocabulary unfit for newly adult questions. Not that I know what to ask. What I really want to know is why I'm so lonely and why the children whisper as I pass. Dhaka at dusk is a mystery, a graveyard, a newborn baby. My grandparents' pond settles into a still mask, and underneath the lily pads I imagine a tumult similar to what's happening inside me, my skin

camouflaging livid veins, moulting heart. **They found the boy today arranged with the water lilies in the still deep pond he has empty eyes all his soft parts eaten by the tilapia and the eels** I don't know what's betraying me. I am wearing their clothes (my clothes), I'm speaking their language (my language), but somehow, they know I'm not from here. Can they smell it perhaps? The sweat that issues too easily into the little hand mowed clutched damply in my fingers. Or maybe they see it in some unlikely angle, some betraying hunch or arch in my body. Of course, there are times when I feel at home. Wearing the light blue shalwar kameez that has slowly become my favourite because of its easy folds, its washed-through thinness. Sitting under the fan whirling at just the right speed to juxtapose the unbearable weight of the heat and the snap of cooling wind, teetering between the two like the satisfaction of tears. And playing Speed Trump in my father's village home with my cousins, the card game we are obsessed with, driven by language barriers and a need to relate. We call our bets, throw down our trumps, nod knowingly, and in the midst of that, I feel comfort that is only more real because of its fleetingness. It disappears with the last slap of the cards when we all awkwardly disperse to get ready for dinner. **through water logged streets rubber sandals sucking, flapping the corner store is smoky sharp lit by swinging kerosene lamps powdered milk, oil, pickled mangoes sugar, cigarettes, light bulbs, biscuits back to the house by the pond rubber sandals sticking, slapping**

It's hard to imagine that my father grew up in this village, nothing but emerald rice paddies and fruit trees for miles and miles. I watch the half clothed little boys play soccer in the water-logged fields with an old acquaintance of my father's. "We used to play here when we were children," he says smiling. His remaining few teeth are stained red with *paan*, the national tobacco and betel leaf addiction. "Not your father though. We asked him, but he was always studying. He said he was going to America. We didn't believe him. We didn't even believe in America." I can see why. I can hardly believe in America either from where

I'm standing. Even though I know my father's relentless iron determination firsthand, it's still difficult to see how he left this place. Most of the time, I am suffocated by the silence. My mother and I have never known how to talk to each other. For all the conflict between my father and me, we at least can present our cases, however polar, shout out our logic, no matter how dichotomous, and reach our own separate and tragic conclusions. We've *communicated*, to some degree, even if there's no trace of nuance, complexity, or emotion. It's all black and white and right and wrong. Feeling, my mother's greatest gift, has always been the first casualty. My mother has had allergies all my life. Here in Bangladesh, she seems to be better, the heat blooming in her cheeks, her motions easy and practised. I used to think that her bloodshot eyes were a sign of weakness. Perhaps that's why she asks her questions so plaintively, because she can sense my disregard. **Listen. I want to tell you something important, and I want you to listen carefully, ok?** It's as if she doesn't realise that I always listen, that I always have, and I remember every last thing she's ever said. She's so careful and yet so careless with her words, and of course, I can't see that it's all consistently about feeling. Instead I focus on her watery eyes, her thin eyelids, and it reminds me of every goddamn time I've loved her, so many times I could die from the counting. **Listen carefully, ok?** Her voice upturned, but still dignified, *Something important.* And sometimes I want to burst out and say the only important thing is that we're alive (immigrants being prone to rhetoric or silence and I'm no different from my mother in this respect), but I can't remind her of that, not now, with the red bloodshotness and the almost tears. I always imagine something else just underneath, instead of only the dust. **dusk drapes over the city grey ragged children scream hair matted like dry leaves ghosts darting after each other a little girl with a palm frond follows them, her voice fading grey ragged children melt into the cooling darkness**

Abeer Hoque is a Bangladeshi who recently won the Tanenbaum Award for nonfiction in the USA.

Letters from TORONTO

REBECCA SULTANA

In my Diaspora Studies class a comment that a student made had me thinking. Tawn Marshall, a minor in Indigenous Studies, remarked that the authors of the best books of the year category in *The Globe and Mail* were still predominantly white and male. Her comment was all the more ironic as we sat in a class reading fictions and theories from diaspora writers with South Asian roots. Things haven't changed much, I thought. When I started out as an M.A. student in Texas, just over thirteen years ago, I wrote my thesis on Walker Percy, a white Southern writer. To me American literature largely connotated that, male and white. My American literature syllabus at Chittagong University was entirely devoid of femininity in that it consisted entirely of the stalwarts of Modernism-- Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Frost, Miller and Tennessee Williams. In Texas, I became familiar with more Southern writers but contemporary ones, Barrie Hannah, Shelby Foote and James Autry. But most importantly, I read a host of women writers--Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Bobbie Ann Mason, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Paula Gunn Allen and others. As I moved on to doctoral studies at a different university, it was with the intention of continuing on to American literature. My graduate advisor, however, had other ideas. In one of our meetings she suggested that I read Bharati

Mukherjee, a writer I had never heard of. Coming from her, the proposition appeared suspect and I was immediately put on my guards. I was not about to be made into the token in-house postcolonial scholar of the Department. I had no intention of being molded into a living stereotype. Being the only South Asian in the department, actually the only Asian, I felt that I was being set up to serve a purpose and I deliberately disregarded Professor Hughes' advice for as long as I could. Then my media studies professor, who is from Hyderabad, suggested that I read Meena Alexander, a fellow Hyderabad, now teaching at Hunter college, Columbia University. Coming from another South Asian this time, his motives seemed less dubious. Of course, the fact that he was one of my favorite professors helped too. Out of curiosity I did read Alexander's *Nampally Road* and I loved it. I went on to read Mukherjee as well but my sentiments for her were different. I was soon into minority writers, not only the South Asian variety but all the hyphenated ones. Cristina Garcia from Cuba, Edwidge Danticat from Haiti, Julia Alvarez from Dominican Republic and Judith Ortiz Cofer from Puerto Rico. I found them all exhilarating. I could empathize with so much that they wrote about. When Alvarez wrote about her struggles with Americanization in the face of parental objections, it struck a familiar chord. How true to life, I thought, as I myself dealt with the rapid Americanization of my own daughter. The conservative

Thoughts on Diasporic literature

Mom that I am, I often had to curb her exuberant enthusiasm into assimilation. When Alexander looked nostalgically towards home and felt almost physical pain, I understood. As her heroine Sandhya flew thousands of miles to be near her dying father, I relived my own experience. I had found a whole new world and immersed myself into it. Yet, most often, these books did not come from leading publishers. Along with Latina and Native American writings, most South Asian fictions were published from smaller and mostly feminist presses such as Aunt Lute Press, Mercury House or Kitchen Table--Women of Color Press. But at least the books were seeing the light of day and were gradually being incorporated into minority literature categories. It was finally with the winning of the Pulitzer Prize by Jhumpa Lahiri, who was a second generation Indian-American writer born in the United Kingdom, that minority literature was officially legitimized into mainstream American literature status. Within Diaspora literature we usually see three trends, the teary-eyed nostalgic laments for home, the exuberant assimilation into the new culture and the conflictual negotiations into a dual identity of culture sharing. The third is more relevant for the second and subsequent generations with assimilation becoming more prominent with the passing of times. I, too, believe that the third trend is more legitimate a position to hold. In the contemporary world of globalization and transcultural mobility, traveling is often as

easy as getting on to a plane. Unless one is forced into exile for reasons beyond one's control, political or otherwise, lamenting over home is somewhat hypocritical. One can always take the plane back. It is a conscious choice one makes and one has to adjust to it. Salman Rushdie put it succinctly when he described memories of home as "broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost." But he also added hopefully: "The broken glass is not merely a mirror of nostalgia. It is also, I believe, a useful tool with which to work in the present." Why not, I ask myself, make the most of the cultural *mélange*? In my second stint of diaspora, in Canada this time, I see hybridity in a whole new light. It's neither the unapologetic assimilation of a Bharati Mukherjee nor the sorrowful backward glances of a Meena Alexander but an empowered state of cultural affinity. This is exactly what Homi Bhabha has mentioned that "the passage between fixed identification opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy." As I ride the Toronto subway line, I marvel at the heterogeneity of the people around me. I believe I can see a representation of the four corners of the world in one single compartment. The Somali women in their colourful saree like outfits, East Europeans who would, by all aspect, be deemed native white Canadians, that is, until they open their mouths, our very own Desis, Chinese, Philipinos

and many others who keep me guessing. On Danforth Avenue, depending in which section I find myself, I can buy Bangladeshi food, Greek food or Caribbean. A few more miles to the West is the China town and North West from there is the Indian section. Actually the whole of Toronto is divided into sections, or ghettos, to be more blunt, of ethnic diversities replete with food, cuisine, clothings and artifacts. Canadian Diaspora writing is equally varied. Interestingly, with the ease of traveling, many now are doubly diasporan in the sense that they have dual homes. Dionne Brand lives in Toronto but travels to her native Trinidad as well as to other places to work or lecture. Olive Senior lives alternately in Jamaica and Canada. Rohinton Mistry is more at home in his fictional "Bombay" than in Toronto. Such flexibility is yet another reflection of the Canadian mosaic that Canadians are proud to attest. Yet Canada is not free from social problems such as gun related violence, for instance. In the coming January election gun control is undoubtedly one of the debated issues. Much of this violence is attributed to social tensions arising from severe economic challenges of certain minority groups and racial disintegration. This has been more meditated on in the wake of the recent French race riots. Canada, as a nation of immigrants, is now taking stock of its own national policies. As one reader expressed in the letters to the editor in the Canadian edition of *Times*: "We must make sure that Canada's

educational system imparts a sense of shared values and that there are real opportunities for all." Talking about educational institutions, let me end with an anecdote told me by Sherene Razack, a professor and a well-known writer on race and human rights issues at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Sherene, by the way, is of Indian origin and had immigrated from Trinidad with her family when she was fourteen. While teaching at U of Toronto, Sherene had noticed that Jewish students got days off on their holidays whereas students of other faiths did not. On one particular Eid day she had pasted a hand written "Eid Mubarak" on her door. Soon after an open-mouthed colleague rushed in. "Sherene," she gasped, "I didn't know you were related to Hosne Mubarak."

This had happened a few years ago. I am sure things have changed since then. For example, at the start of Ramadan this year, my daughter was impressed on hearing her Principal announce over the school speaker about the reverence due to the occasion and the significance of the month for the Muslim students. The school itself is a multicultural hub. A very good friend of my daughter is from Turkey and wears the hijab. But the biggest revelation of the Canadian cultural diversity dawned on me when I discovered Wal-Mart selling all kinds of lentils, something I had not seen in the U.S.

New Year Bagatelle

A fine time we are having when a year passes away unwaked and a new one slips in untoasted My hi-tech toy livens things up a bit: a friend's picture SMS sighs: Adieu 2005, the integers flanking a nude female torso whose breasts double as noughts-- and O O O what noughts, the infinite being of their circularity (if I may be permitted a mathematico-metaphysical shuffle) a pert rebuff to sartorial fascism Or could they be a grimly humorous warning-- stylized bombs with detonator nipples? Well, you can have your semiotic pick as irreversible days unravel their own slippery tale

KAISER HUQ

The Review and the 'Exchange': Editor's Note

Phone calls, emails and letters poured in from readers in response to my review of Mr. Manzur Murshed's novel *Broken Milestones* (December 11, 2005) and the subsequent exchange with Messrs. Faruq Choudhury and K. Z. Islam (December 24, 2005). Though near unanimous support was expressed for the editorial position/argument, it became clear to me that many thought that in my rejoinder the last paragraph need not have been written. Everything else was fine, they said--in fact, refreshing--but no matter which way you dice it, that last paragraph was uncalled for. I agree. My apologies to all concerned. One interesting letter was from Mr. S. A. Reza Hussain (ex-Member of Parliament, ex-Chairman, Parjatan Corporation) who, among many, many other compelling formulations, informed me that "The author of *Broken Milestones*" Masuq Bhai is a friend of mine. He should be thankful to you that because of your criticism the book has generated some interest amongst the readers of English language literature." Mr. Hussain's words contain a deeper truth than is readily apparent, for it implicitly raises a point which goes beyond the particularities of Mr. Murshed's auto-da-fé, my review of it, or who said what to whom. It is a point that I think readers instinctively appreciated, the fact that there was a larger issue being debated here: about the standards of English used in our public spaces, about the need for new distinctions within those very spaces. Seen from this perspective, our English is the long-term gainer here. Therefore if the review, and the subsequent exchange of opinions, helped raise our collective awareness about this issue, then all of us involved, Mr. Manzur Murshed, Mr. Faruq Choudhury, I, Mr. K. Z. Islam, and indeed, Mr. Reza Hussain, ought to feel pleased about it.

BOOKNOTES

KHADEMUL ISLAM

From the Delta: English Fiction from Bangladesh, edited by Niaz Zaman; Dhaka: The University Press Limited; 2005; Tk. 400; 211 pp.

The short story, one writer has observed, remains one of the chief means of literary expression in our times, simply because it represents both a discipline and a challenging freedom. It is doubly so in the case of Bangladesh, where the English language novel has yet to make its definitive appearance. This book, a collection of 24 short stories previously published in newspapers and journals, edited by Niaz Zaman

therefore affords us both a comparatively rare and wide-ranging look at English language fiction written by Bangladeshis living at home and abroad. Beginning as it does with Roquiah Sakhawat Hossein's (popularly known as 'Rokeya Begum') 1905 'Sultana's Dream' they neatly span, as the editor notes, "a hundred years" of English language writing in "the delta." Of particular interest to me was Syed Walullah's short story 'No Enemy' which was written in English and later translated into Bengali (*Nishphal Jiban Nishphal Jatra*). It made me reach for my Bengali Walullah stories, and I was somewhat struck by the fact that the author himself apparently did not think it was absolutely necessary that the translation stick closely to the English original. Each has its own different atmospherics. This should provide some food for thought to would-be translators of his fiction. Of note among the other stories are those by Kazi Anis Ahmed, Nuzhat Mannan, Syed Badrul Hasan and Razia Khan. The latter's is an unexpectedly caustic piece on the writer's lot in our society, while Hasan's tale is a sly, unusual take on Bengalis in London. However it is Kazi Anis Ahmed (in a story titled 'Forty Steps' previously published in *The Minnesota Review*) who shows the most promise:

"(Mr. Shikdar) shaved standing in front of his bedroom window. It overlooked the Bararasta, which was the only concrete road in Jamshepdur. The rest were gravel or mud paths. It was a Tuesday, and on Tuesdays the grocers were permitted to open shop on the Bararasta, rather than in the bazaar at the periphery of the town. The spot of Bararasta right in front of Mr. Shikdar's house was monopolized by the fishersellers. Warm haggling voices and the rank smell of dead fish floated in through Mr. Shikdar's window. 'First hilsa of the season, take it for your son-in-law,' yelled Abdullah, the fishmonger. 'How much for the hilsa?' 'Five hundred.' 'Pah, for five hundred I could buy the whole river; this is just a hilsa.' 'Yes, but try cooking the river and try cooking my hilsa,' said Abdullah, who was usually more interested in the bargaining than in the selling. People would stand around and quibble with him endlessly, even if they had no intention of buying fish." A small issue is raised by the masking of a four letter word in one story by asterisks. I for one think that, given the convention everywhere else, the time for such fig leaves in serious writing is long past. Future English writing here will probably reflect

this fact. Lastly, though the printer's devil lurks (N. Sobhan's 'The Last Letter' has 'Latter' on page headings) and the editor's pen is occasionally absent (in, for example, the curious sentence on p. 166, "the foreignness of falling in love is chilling not the carefree commitment such marriages impose," or on p. 157, "...beginning to take the negative situations into her stride"), by Dhaka English language productions standards the volume is outstanding.

Unforeseen Affection and Other Love Poems by Jayaprabha (translated by P. V. Narasimha Rao); Delhi: Penguin India; 2005; Rs. 250; pp. 223.

This bilingual volume of poems is somewhat remarkable at first sight in that an ex-chief minister and prime minister of India, P.V. Narasimha Rao, has translated them from Telugu into English. Telugu is the official language of Andhra Pradesh and one of the four literary Dravidian languages (Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam are the other three). Jayaprabha is a well-known, widely published Telugu poet, and Narasimha Rao's enthusiasm for her is heartfelt. In an otherwise low-key introduction that blends sensible

sentiments on literary translations and awareness of Telugu literary traditions, he writes that "Jayaprabha and her poetry are inseparable...Jayaprabha means intensity--at times the unbearable intensity of a *krudha naari* (angry woman), at others the intensity of unfathomably deep affection and tenderness." A number of the poems draw heavily on Hindu mythology and Telugu culture, and the intermix can make for slow reading. Footnotes help, and the translations are creditable, but some of them do not attain the absolute "freshness" and "original imagery" Rao speaks of. One misses an A. K. Ramanujan here, whose careful delineations of Tamil poetry has made possible the opening up of an entirely different poetic landscape, and who, as opposed to Sanskrit, advocated regional languages and, in his inimitable phrase, 'native woodnotes.' Telugu is heavily Sanskritized, and in translations

those 'woodnotes,' which so obviously must account for Jayaprabha's power in her mother tongue, get blanked out. Still, read it, and explore. The lines below are from 'Along the Word-Paths.'

Shall I tell you a truth?
When a word, however noble, gets worn out by overuse,
I find it too narrow to express my thoughts.
And 'love' is one such word.

Like the new day that begins while I think of you,
I want some new dreams.
Some waves in the ocean of language.
They should be, regardless of the beauty of words, like--
young couples' green-chili-hot talk,
birds circling over water in the tank,
lovely green lawns,
like a baby's joyous laughs,
like the sunset in the west...

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.