SHORT STORY

City Shoes in The Village - Part II

MAHMUD RAHMAN

The pungent smell of dried fish curry, the thud of wooden spoon against clay pot, the whispers of conversation woke Altaf up. He had dozed off to sleep after dinner, tired of waiting for his brother to show up. Now he alighted from Kamal's bed where his mother had insisted he sleep, and he walked into the kitchen next door. His mother and Kamal looked up at him, their faces lit by the light of the hurricane lantern on the floor. Kamal stood up to greet him. He was thinner than Altaf, but almost half a head taller.

"Go back to your food," Altaf said, sitting himself down on a stool. "You've grown. But still thin as always."

"I tell him he's working too hard and not eating enough. After your father passed away, he's become even skinnier."

"Let me go to sleep now. You two can talk." Placing her hand to the small of her back, she began to rise to her feet. Kamal stood up to give her a hand. She shuffled off to her room.

Kamal was the first to speak. "I heard about your boat over in the next village. Everyone's talking about it."

"Word like that gets around, doesn't it? It's one of a kind, you know." Altaf's eyes brightened as he related the story of how he had built the boat. One day while on a job-related errand at the courthouse, he had made the acquaintance of an Englishman who built boats in south Calcutta. Mr. Wilkins was impressed with Altaf's knowledge of country boats and his curiosity about motorized transport. Altaf had long been fascinated by engines, and from Wilkins he set out to learn everything he could about motorboats. He built his boat on Wilkins's boatyard, and the Englishman taught him how to install the motorcar engine.

Kamal had paused eating. He was staring at Altaf, his mouth open. "This Ingreji sahib, he helped you learn all this?"

"Oh yes, he is a good friend."

"He considers you his friend as well?"

"Oh yes, we've done many things together. He takes me hunting sometimes and I've even eaten dinner with his family." Altaf did not disclose that this had only happened once. "You should see the delicacies they eat. So tasty. This reminds me, I brought some cake from one of Calcutta's finest bakeries."

"I'm happy with what we have here," Kamal replied as he stood up and stepped outside to rinse off his plate.

Altaf felt like he had been slapped. But how could one respond to such a comment? Best to let it go for now, he decided. His body ached, his brain felt drained. He was relieved when Kamal, coming back from outside, declared that he was ready for bed. He had a long day ahead of him in the morning because he would be going to fetch their sister Shona Bu. She was now living with her husband in the riverport town. Kamal insisted on sleeping on the floor. Altaf was thankful, his bones still sore from the nights he had slept on the hardness of the boat's surface.

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Late the next evening, Kamal brought back their sister, accompanied by her infant girl and five-year old son Masoom. The boy was thrilled to see the uncle he had never known and won the battle with his mother to stay at his grandmother's for the entire duration of Altaf's visit.

artwork by t h lisa

Kamal joined Altaf for most of the family meals, but otherwise he remained busy on errands. Sometimes he went to assist the laborers working on land the family owned in the next village. Other times he went into town on what he described to Altaf as business trips. He never elaborated and, though he was curious, Altaf was hesitant to pry into his brother's affairs.

One by one, the family came out to look at Altaf's boat. Others also arrived from miles around to admire it. Men who built boats further down the river said he had done a fine job. The children asked for rides. He took Masoom and some of the other children. It was awkward having to pick and choose, but there were simply too many children and his fuel was limited.

More than anything else, he relished the food. Altaf feasted on fresh fish; he ate dried fish, prepared in a sauce or mashed with lots of red pepper. Nothing he'd eaten in Calcutta compared to these meals. The region around the city simply did not have the variety of fish that teemed in the rivers and ponds of eastern Bengal.

Even the weather cooperated. There wasn't much of the sticky heat that sometimes hangs around in October, and the cyclones stayed away. He took long walks every day, seeking the spots familiar to him. By the fishpond he found the guava tree, where he used to perch himself, gnawing on not-quite-ripe fruit while observing kingfishers and storks diving and prodding the water for fish. The grapefruit tree where he had first discovered a bird's nest was no more. It had fallen in a storm, he learnt. Near the primary school, looking as disheveled as ever, the children burst out in joy and relief after their day's lessons were over. Just outside was the open space where he used to fly kites.

Whenever he was among adults, Altaf found himself detached from his body. It was as if his spirit soared into the air and looked down on the villagers below. He could not pin down the source of his unease. During conversations, someone would mention a name and they expected him to know the person. But he'd wrack his brain and fail. One or two times he asked, and it turned out to be someone he had grown up with in childhood. He only ended up feeling foolish. The men spoke of revenue, property disputes, and the greed of the moneylender. The women bemoaned the high price of salt and shortage of cloth. What did Altaf know of such things?

His brother's behavior continued to irk him. It wasn't that Kamal was unfriendly. No, whenever they met, he was respectful. But he seemed to be working hard to avoid spending any time with Altaf. Altaf asked him to come along for a ride in the boat. Kamal agreed, but on the appointed day the sun set and there was no sign of his brother.

In the meantime, Altaf was getting weary of the villagers dropping by. They had concluded that he must be a man of great wealth. Some of them asked for loans. He said he did not have any money to spare. They replied, oh sure, and then pointed at his boat and the brick house.

Even the children, who had looked to him with awe, were turning out to be fickle. Those who had been lucky enough to be invited on boat rides still admired him, but he grew tired of their never-ending questions. The others he had turned away only gave him sullen and resentful looks. One evening as he returned from a walk, someone threw a stone at him from behind a clump of trees.

Altaf could not wait to return to Calcutta.

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While nature may have showered Altaf's visit with kindness, two weeks was a long time and this was not a land with that much kindness to spare. Just a few days left to go and something had to go wrong. When he had taken his nephew out for a ride, Altaf discovered that the boat was taking on water. The coat of tar he'd put on just before he left Calcutta had failed to waterproof the hull.

This morning, even before the first crow of the rooster, Altaf was up and out of bed. He had slept lightly. Unwilling to chance that the rains would stay away for his final days, he was determined to grab as many sunny hours as he could get to put a fresh coat of tar on the boat.

His mother was already up preparing steamed pitthas. She asked him to wait and have one. He felt torn, for he really did want the pittha. Often during winter days in the city Altaf found himself craving the sweetness and comfort of those mornings of his childhood when his mother rose early to make these sweets.He promised to take a break and return soon. "Wake Masoom up and have him join you. He'll be glad to help you," he told his mother. After splashing water on his face, he hurried over to the canal bank. Before sundown the day before, he had hired some of the village men to pull the boat out of the water. It now stood propped up with poles dug into the soil. The screw was slightly raised above the ground, the rear of the vessel resting on a platform of sturdy bamboo. The boat teetered slightly off balance and the bamboos strained under the weight of the engine. The hull was dry, and that's all that mattered.

As Altaf approached the boat the strong smell of melting tar reached his nostrils. Shiraj must be up. Coming around the boat, he saw that the boy had started a fire and was heating up the tar. Shiraj was squatting before the fire, stirring the tar with a thick stick. Altaf knew that the boy would have begun to put the tar on by himself, but he had warned him against that. He preferred to do all the major work on the boat by himself.

Seeing the expectant look on the boy's face, Altaf grunted a quick "You've done well." The acrid smell of the hot tar burned away whatever remnant of sleep was still in his head. It may have been alien to the otherwise natural odors of the water's edge--a blend of muddy and fishy smells--but whether it was tar, petrol, or diesel, there was something about those modern industrial odors that smelled sweet to the man who had made the big city his home. Altaf took up a brush and began to apply generous strokes of the black liquid on the wooden hull.

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Mahmud Rahman is a Bangladeshi writer who lives in Oakland, California.

Elegy for Nanabhaya

(for my grandfather)

TARFIA FAIZULLAH

I slice a mango for guests, four horizontal slits
then three vertical, then arrange the fragrant

wet cubes in blue bowls before turning to the
sink to suck the sweetest, slickest bit of pulp

from the large, slippery seed. Fifteen years ago
you peeled one for me: one rough hand holding

its round, red body while the other stroked the
knife against its skin until it gave way to the

gold beneath.

When your body lay on a bed of ice for three
days, adorned only in a white cotton shift,

I had but few memories: your dark, stern face,
a silver urn for tobacco remains. I fingered a

hard, painful pimple, willing it to erupt, while
weeping men walked past to sample your wife's

rice pudding, its fragrant affirmation of grief. You
didn't know that in your body's last dying moments,

I held your leg, its dry skin now remembered in
every inch of space I curve against his back.

Tarfia Faizullah will begin studies for her master's in creative writing in Virginia, USA.

Book Review

Consistency of Standard

K. Anis Ahmed

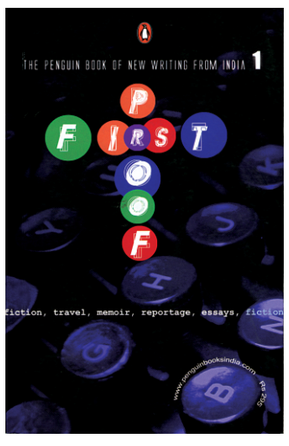
For all its recent success, Indian English has not yet produced an anthology dedicated to new writing like the *Pushcart Prize* or the *O' Henry Awards* anthologies in America. *First Proof*, subtitled "The Penguin Book of New Writing in India," seems designed to fill that gap. It is an initiative to be welcomed by any measure, though such a production immediately raises certain concerns: Are the writings truly new and worthwhile? Or, have they been marred by either genuine shortage of worthy material, or due to nepotism or favoritism?

In this case, by "new," the editors meant no authors who have already "published more than two books." Indeed, the editors were so conscientious about choosing genuine "emerging talent" talent that they did not even approach any author who has "received exceptional notice with their debut works." Often, new writing is so weak that editors are forced to relax their rules. Luckily, Indian English writing has matured to the point that the editors of *First Proof* could avoid making such exceptions.

Indeed, maturity might indeed be an apt one-word descriptor for this collection. It consists of seventeen works of fiction, and thirteen of non-fiction. Even within those broad categories they display a diversity of forms. What holds them together is a consistency of standard; despite flashes of individual felicity, or its lack, they belong to a certain basic level in terms of both form and language. What makes reading new writers nerve-wracking for well-wishers is the fact that the experience is akin to watching a juggler-in-training. One is constantly worried that the tyro will drop a ball; one cannot sit back and enjoy the show with the confidence one brings to the outrages of a professional circus. In case of writing, often the first line or page is sufficient to signal if one is in the hands of an assured literary performer. By that measure, while none of the writers here are famous, almost none is an amateur.

Not all the pieces are of equal standard or promise. The non-fiction might be usefully divided not into their conventional descriptions, but three other categories: Nostalgia; Political and Social Reportage, and Voyages. Not surprisingly, the strongest of the pieces belong to the two latter categories. Of the two nostalgia pieces, "Living Dangerously with V. S. Naipaul," is nothing more than a mildly amusing anecdote. An attempt is made to use a personal letter by a travel-weary Naipaul to the author to explain the celebrity author's famous contempt for India; however, intellectually it is not very persuasive. The other piece, "Didima: The Last Inga-Banga," tries to compare Brown Sahibs favorably with the globe-trotting Indian arrivistes of today, but again the arguments are feeble, and smack of residual colonial class sensibilities.

The political essays in this collection stand in a sharp contrast to the essays of colonial hangover. Indeed, three of the essays--"The Tiger in his Cage," "The Saheb of Siwan," and "Goose-Stepping into the Sunrise"--have a great deal in common. They deal with strongmen of extremist persuasions, and respectively, of global, regional and very local fame. In order, they relate the authors' encounters with the leader of the Tamil Tigers, Prabhakaran; a political godfather in Bihar of national renown; and an RSS national spokesman. All three essays display a remarkable similarity of attitude and style. They approach their subjects with a certain openness, ready to understand the secret of their convictions or magnetism, but they also maintain their own liberal judgment. The unruffled liberality of their views in the face of such strong and disturbing subjects, and the agility with which they contain them within their forms with precision and humor, are all marks of the maturity not only of these writers, but indeed the culture that has nurtured them.



Two essays, "The Alchemy of Not Having," and "The Daughters of Yasin Painter," seem to address the alchemies of just not having, but indeed of apathy and hope, respectively, in the face of the harsh social realities of India.

Several of the other pieces--ranging in topics from America's war on terror to colonial Bibis--though good, have nothing startlingly new to say. "A Kyrgyz Odyssey," tracing the footsteps of an ancient monk is perhaps the most promising of these remaining pieces. The language is crisp; the cold journey imagined vividly: "The cold closed punishing fingers around the men's bones. The monk thought he would shiver for the rest of his life; if he lived through this, he would shiver forever."

On the whole, the non-fiction seems to be stronger than the fiction. This might be because--dare one set off generic battles--if the subject is well-chosen, with a mind for good empirical descriptions and analysis, a solid sense of structure, a knack for evocative expression and details, it is possible to put together a decent essay. By contrast, the secrets of a really good story seem to be more elusive. While its components can be laid bare in deconstructive readings, no simple formula can ever yield a good story. After all the analysis, and all the training, a good story seems to require, like a Zen painting, a deftness of touch that lies beyond any planning or deliberation. The rarity of that kind of talent is borne out in these otherwise quite competent stories.

Several of the pieces ("The Prophet," "Route 36") resort to post-modernist conceit or format, and a few fall into the category of ephemera ("Vaak," "Ziarat"). Among the stories in the realm of realism, "The Other Evening" and "Matunga" are probably the most successful. They are swift and evocative, where several others--such as, "Kopjes at Serengeti," "The Road to Barabar," or "Winter Evenings"--feel a bit slow, if not plodding.

In "The Other Evening," the protagonist is a young man who traps himself, without much protest, into an evening with a prostitute. A prostitute, psychologically and culturally more equal to the protagonist than is customary, turns a possibly trite tale into a genuine account of urban dereliction and reprieve: funny, sad, evanescent. In "Matunga," the protagonist is an old man, displaced from South India in Bombay, with a wife dying of cancer. The man's mysterious forays into a particular neighborhood, brings a shred of solace to his daughter as well, once she understands his reasons. In both cases, swift, unsentimental prose is critical to the stories' success.

Of all the other stories, only one really bears special mention, a real gem of a tale, or soliloquy, called "The Last Annal of Alamgir." The author's bio explains that it was adapted from an original long poem, and the prose bears all the best marks of a poem: flights of fancy convey the opprobrium of fate, even when it delivers the world, in startlingly disjointed epithets that carry the weight and sadness of prophecy.

Most people may not have time for anything but affirmed excellence, but for that segment of readers who enjoy talent-hunting, there are moments here when the young juggler gets through the act without dropping a ball, and adds a twist all his own that promises greater acts to follow.

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Somewhere in the South

MUNJULIKA RAHMAN

artwork by amina

A PLACE

"I saw a princess in my dreams
She lives beyond seven seas
And thirteen rivers…"

I hum the tune from an old Shuchitra-Uttam movie, as the onions in the frying pan crackle and make my eyes water.

Here I am beyond seven seas and thirteen rivers, and there are no princesses here. This is the backyard of America, not New York, not Las Vegas, not the glamorous America we see on TV as we sit in our dimly lit rooms in some obscure part of the 'Third World.'

This is a small university town in the south that becomes all orange and purple when there is a football game. Downtown is twenty minutes walk from my apartment. The first bar you pass as you walk down the cobbled street is Bad Apple. It has a dark red door and small red tables, and it looks expensive from the outside. There is a Hallmark across from Bad Apple, with a bell at the door that tinkles when someone enters.

On a side street there is a white church and a bank. Occasionally cars pass by, but the roads are clean and the air smells of grass and fall leaves. It's an intimate town, and people smile as you pass them, but I feel no intimacy.

Is it the onions that make my eyes water, or are they tears?

WEATHER

I can sit in the amphitheater with my back to the sun for hours. This sun is not like our tropical sun that frizzles anything in its path. The fall sun in the South is lukewarm, and it warms my shoulders as I walk to the biology department every morning. Through the windows in the lab I see the sun brightening up in the afternoons, making the leaves look greener and the sky bluer.

Today, I must get out of my dark apartment and spend some time outside. Soon the winter will come and the sun will lose its zeal, and I will have to hide inside the huge jacket that I bought from the thrift store.

But for now, the breeze coming through the window is warm and fragrant.

MY HOUSE

My American room-mate is away for the weekend, visiting his girlfriend. So I have opened up the windows, the front and the back doors, and I am cooking. The smell from the masala might stick to my shirt and the cover of the sofa, the lone furniture in the living room, but I am craving some "real" food. The breeze is blowing in dry leaves into the kitchen through the back door. The small porch in the backyard has dirt and dust, and while the rice cooker cooks the rice, I take the old broom and brush the leaves off. Not that we ever have time to sit out here, but still.

POLITICS

The student lounge, opposite to our dorms, houses the washing machines, a kitchen that is never used, a table tennis table, the resident director's office, and a few computers. I have gotten three new emails. One is from The Times telling me they want me back as a subscriber. I've been getting this for the past few months, ever since I signed up for their four free issues. I see now that the offer was just to get our email address in a legal way.

The other two emails are from the frisbee folks. Every Thursday they meet near the baseball field to play frisbee, and hold an inter-departmental frisbee competition at the end of each year. I went to a couple of the "Ultimate Frisbee Meets," as they call it, but stopped going after a few weeks. One of the emails is from a Physics department student describing how the Biology students play frisbee as if they were playing with their mother's best china. The next one is from an alumna who graduated five years ago and wants to be taken off the mailing list.

A PERSON

Last weekend an old woman was waiting at the bus stand with me. She was wearing a blue shirt, black pants, and sneakers, and her name tag said "Wal-Mart" and "JUDY" below it. She stood holding on to a bicycle, which had a placard at the back that said "For Sell $50"

MY BAR

Somewhere down the road from the Bad Apple is another bar, Keith Street, with cheap beer and pool tables and TVs mounted on the wall. Here doors are always open, and people sit around the counters and at the tables and talk, as smoke swirls above their heads. Around the pool tables, loud Southern guys sometimes pause from their games to look up at the TVs, holding their pool cues as if there are resting their rifles on the ground.

THE LIBRARY

It's almost ten at night, and I head towards the library to prepare for next day's classes. The library is a six-, maybe seven-storied building, with tall glass windows in the front. Opposite to the main entrance there is a fountain surrounded by a shallow water body, and the water is reflected in the glass windows. But you can also see the glitter of lights and students sitting at tables inside the building, together it is as if you are watching them through a screen over which water is flowing.

I pick up the newspaper at the front counter and consciously sit away from the window. The Tigers ate the Chickens…the home team has won, new professors have joined, one dining hall has a new chef. I look in the classifieds for cheap apartments. Old lady renting out a room…young women renting out bodies. It stays in my head for a while, then I dismiss it.

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