SHORT STORY

City Shoes in The Village-Part III (Concluding)

MAHMUD RAHMAN

The sun was already up over the trees in the east when he heard footsteps. Looking in the direction of the family compound, he saw a lanky figure ambling down the footpath. Kamal stopped a little distance away from the boat. He wrinkled his nose at the strong smell in the air and sneezed.

"Ma doesn't understand why you didn't stay around and eat breakfast," Kamal said.

"I had to get started on this work."

"But she said she cooked your favorite *pittha*. You knew that she was going to do that this morning."

"I didn't have time."

"It doesn't take that long. You'd work better on a full stomach."

"I'll go over and eat soon. Is that all right with you?" His voice rose.

Altaf had been thrilled that even though winter was two months away, his mother had chosen this morning to make *pitthas* for him. But he had already informed her that he would go back and eat. Why did she have to send his brother to nag him? Now Altaf was determined to stay longer at the boat than he had originally intended.

Well, if demands were going to be made on him, he could make some himself. He looked at his brother and barked out, "So where were you yesterday? I told you that I would take you out for a boat ride."

"Oh, I had to go over to Shona Bu's house. It got so late that she wouldn't let me go. I left before dawn this morning."

Altaf noted that Kamal did not say why he had to go to their sister's village. They had planned this trip a week ago.

"You didn't show up last week either."

"I had to go into town and buy some things. You know, some of us have obligations."

Altaf stopped his work, glared at his brother and demanded, "What is that supposed to mean?"

Kamal replied, "Nothing. You know the work around here. After Father died, it all fell on me."

The tone was lowered, but the accusation was not withdrawn. Just hidden behind a few declarations of fact that Altaf could not refute.

"You're looking at the future, you know." With a wave of his arms toward the country boats in the distance, he continued, "In a few years those vessels will be obsolete. Look at them, they go so slow. Scrawny men with their poles and oars. And those flimsy sails. No, the future belongs to steel, oil, and engine power. We are so lucky the English are bringing modern machinery into this country."

Kamal stood there, his face blank.

Altaf went on, "It was good that you were able to get that tar from town last week. The boat's been taking on water. Without that tar I don't know how I would make it back."

"It may not be Calcutta," Kamal replied, "But we have plenty here."

Altaf snapped, "What do you know about Calcutta anyway? You've hardly gone beyond the other side of the Meghna!" He regretted his words even as they poured out of his mouth.

The long silence that followed was broken by a small voice yelling in the distance. Masoom came tearing down the footpath, all out of breath. Altaf smiled at him and asked, "What, you're up already and didn't come to help your uncle?"

"Grandma cooked *pittha* this morning. I had to watch her cook and get the first bite. Uncle Kamal, she wants you to do something for her."

Kamal motioned to the child, "Let's go. I'll make sure she gives you another bite."

Altaf pointed in Shiraj's direction. "Take him with you and give him one too." The boy, who'd been sitting quietly in the background, leapt to his feet.

Altaf welcomed the chance to be alone. He had never imagined that his brother would be so open with his resentments. The two of them were only three years apart. When children, they had their share of arguments and even a fistfight or two, but they also spent hours talking about everything that entered their world. When one of them heard an elephant's bell, they ran to get the other so they could both join the village children trailing behind the giant beast. They consoled each other when their father punished them. Altaf had missed these conversations. Coming home, he had hoped Kamal would join him on a river cruise so the two of them could catch up. But his brother refused to give him that satisfaction.

Altaf caught sight of Shiraj who was back stirring the tar. The boy licked his lips and exclaimed to Altaf that he had never tasted anything so delicious.

Shiraj chose this moment to remind Altaf. "Can we go by my village? I'll help you find the way."

"There just isn't enough time."

"Please, sir, just for one day."

"We don't have enough fuel."

artwork by t h lisa

"We can get it at the riverport. You don't have to pay me wages for a whole month."

Altaf shook his head. "I'll send you back on vacation next month."

"But it won't be the same. We are so close. I could even get my grandfather the *pir* to bless your boat."

Altaf shook his head. "It's just not possible."

The boy disappeared to the other side of the boat. Altaf heard him weeping. He wished he could oblige, but he just wanted to be done with this journey. He noticed that Kamal had now returned. His brother had sat down this time. With his back leaning on one of the two coconut trees near the boat, he was preparing to smoke a cigarette. Of the two trees Kamal had chosen the one further away from the boat.

Taking one deep drag from his cigarette, he blew the smoke out, then said, "Ma is crying. She cooked the *pitthas* but you weren't around to eat them when they were hot. She also says that she asked you to stay one more day but you turned her down."

"You know I can't stay longer. I have to be back at my job in five days' time. Why doesn't she understand that?"

"It's not just this. Do you even care about us anymore? Why did you stay away for ten years? When Father died, you didn't come. When Shona Bu got married, you didn't come. She wanted so badly for you to be here and bid her goodbye."

Altaf felt the hair on his arms bristle. So now the accusations finally came into the open. Oh yes, he'd felt them in the glances from his mother and sister, looks that spoke of pleasure at seeing him again but that could not conceal the buried hurts of the past. But he was never sure whether the insinuations were really there or if his own conscience was conjuring them up.

He knew that his response would be feeble, but he gave it a try. "Look, when you have a job with the Ingreji raj, you just can't up and leave any time."

"They give you time off. You could have come sometime."

"Didn't I send money?"

"Money?" Kamal spat out. "You think that's enough? Are we beggars? Yes, everyone lives slightly better because of the money you send. But you've changed into someone nobody seems to know." Kamal slowly added, "It looks like you've become the Ingreji sahib that everyone first thought you were when you pulled up in that boat."

"*Shoorer bachha*!"

"If I am the child of a pig, what does that make you?"

"How dare you? Have you forgotten that I am still your older brother?"

The words 'Ingreji sahib' burned into Altaf's flesh. Oh, he'd enjoyed it when the village children had first addressed him that way. Now, coming from Kamal, this was no child's cry of admiration.

For a minute the two brothers stared at each other. Kamal was the first to make a move. He took a final puff from his cigarette, and then, tossing the butt into the water, he stood up and walked away.

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How could Altaf explain to his people why he had stayed away all these years?

He had often yearned to come back. Sure, the city had its enchantments: the cinema, music, whiskey and women. But that was not why he stayed away for so long. He was convinced that running away, abandoning an eldest son's duties, had marked him with a stigma and he wanted some way to set things in balance. During the time he hung around Wilkins's boatyard, drawing lines and shapes in his head, Altaf seized on the vision of a boat of his own as the solution to put order back into his life. He could return home with a possession that would make the village look at him with pride and respect. In the glow of that admiration who would recall the circumstances in which he had stolen away ten years earlier?

A vision this grand, he had understood, required sacrifice. And the price was high. It wasn't just the money, though that took years to save. The friendship with Wilkins wasn't exactly like how he had portrayed it to his family. True enough, the Englishman had seen something in him, but the line that separated colonial from native had remained intact, even if it had blurred on a few occasions. For an entire year before Wilkins taught him anything, Altaf was merely an errand boy for the man. This, he was told, was normal for an apprentice. So Altaf shopped, hired laborers, and even delivered women to Wilkins. Even though he could carry the Englishman's tools, Altaf was not allowed to use any of the machinery. He could only stand and watch. It was during this year that the letters had come from home asking him to return for his sister's wedding and his father's funeral. But he couldn't comply because he was enmeshed in his obligations to Wilkins, and he didn't want to risk his precarious relationship with the Englishman.

Now here he was just about to leave his village once again, discovering that his calculations had been entirely wrong. He'd only succeeded in creating new imbalances.

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The next day it rained. On and off, all through the day and night. Altaf was pleased that he had put the tar on the boat the day before. The last day he spent inside the house, telling stories to Masoom, and trying to argue his mother out of packing a hundred bundles of food to take back to the city.

Early the next morning, Altaf and Shiraj began their return journey. It was a bright, clear day, and they made good distance by the time night fell. They stopped at one of the small towns along the water and moored the boat for the night.

After they had eaten and the boy fell asleep, Altaf prepared to rest for the night. There was a cool nip in the air. Winter came early along the riverways of Bengal. He unfolded the quilt his mother had thrust into his hands as she had said her goodbye with tearful eyes. He recognized the worn fabric as coming from the saris she used to wear during his childhood. He could remember how she used to feel and smell when he ran to her and wrapped himself around her legs. Did she really save those old pieces of cloth so many years to sew into a quilt for him? Or had she made the quilt years back when she had prayed for him to return?

He held the soft fabric to his face.

Something dropped out of the quilt and fell to the bottom of the boat. He felt around his feet and found the object. It was a tiny copper cylinder with a black string attached to it. His mother had tried to tie the tabeez around his arm as he was about to leave. He had refused to put it on. What could an amulet do? For his return journey, he put his faith in his store of fuel not being used up, in the coat of tar he'd put on with his own sweat, and in the hope that the weather would hold.

He rubbed the amulet in the palm of his hand. He felt the polished copper and the silken string. He wrapped the string around one of his fingers as he recalled his mother's face. When he had rejected the amulet, she had not protested but simply let out a sigh of resignation. Now he realized she hadn't given up at all, just come up with a different strategy. He felt a tiny blade of anger. He unwrapped the string from his finger and stood up. Then, raising his arm behind him, he hurled the amulet into the water. As far as he could.

Unfolding the quilt, all the way this time, Altaf wrapped himself in it. He glanced sideways at Shiraj's sleeping face. The boy's jaw was clenched and his breaths labored, as if he was having an anguished dream. Tomorrow morning, Altaf told himself, he would finally make up his mind whether they should turn back and travel to the boy's village. He would probably do it. He no longer felt in a hurry to get anywhere.

What would he be risking if he showed up a couple of days late to work? His English superiors might yell at him, but more than likely they would simply tut-tut among themselves: *They are all the same. Even the ones who looked so promising. You send them home on holiday and what do you get? They return to Indian Time.*

He could live with that.

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

Clinically Dead

(composed in one of Dhaka's eternal traffic jams)

RUMANA SIDDIQUE

Supine on a trolley

Rolling down fast, faster

Save her please, hurry!

Arteries clogged, bumper to bumper

Thump and clear, thump and clear!

Doctoring with warden batons

Organs visibly fighting

Keep alert, keep alive

Keep talking back

We know you're still there!

Wire her up from vein to vein

Tangled cables plugged in

Screen her every life pulse

Insidious foreign machines

Graphs, charts, data

Monitor her very soul

Inject, inject!

Is she really sinking?

Pump in donated drugs, but

Carefully calculated doses only

Report's really bad we're afraid

She's in the last stage

Carcinogenic deposits in her breasts

Poisoned infant milk, doomed motherhood

Polluted tears from fermenting ducts

Dribble down comatose cheeks

Rancid respiration-fanned breath

Frantic-erratic-static

A hopeless lolling of the head

Dhaka

Clinically dead____________________

[1] Tomorrow's Headline: The nation pays a fitting tribute. Recycled nuclear waste-cultured rose wreaths strew the dead city.

Rumana Siddique teaches English at Dhaka University.

Letter from LONDON

On snell-gabbit besom and snochter-dichter

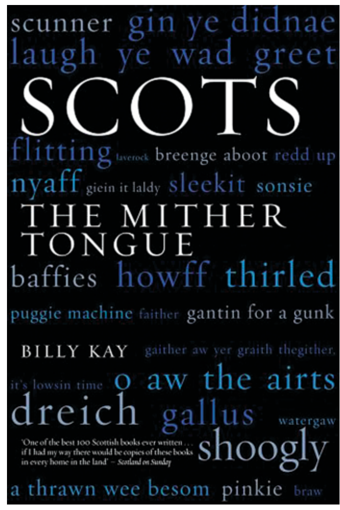
DAVID SANDERSON

The wallagoo wis a wee bit bosky when he tried tae gie the catter-wurr a gaberosie. **(silly man, was, little, drunk, to, give, grumpy woman, kiss)**

It's shameful and sad that, to the best of my knowledge, this sentence has never before been written or said. Not because it's a particularly profound or even inventive statement, but because its words belong to a language that, although spoken by nearly one-third of Scotland's inhabitants, is being allowed to wither on the vine.

The Scots language has an 800-year history, a multi-volume dictionary and is still spoken by 1.6m people in homes, playgrounds and pubs. Its literary stars; be it the Medieval Makars dazzling Europe's courts with their poetry or Rabbie Burns blazing melodically into immortality, have drawn upon a rich, descriptive vocabulary to bring expression to the often turbulent existence of Scotland's people living in a beautiful, violent landscape next to England, one of the world's most rapacious empire-builders.

Today it boasts no chatshows, soap operas, radio stations or newspapers and few speak about getting bosky and giving a girl a gaberosie. Its young speakers grow up being punished in classrooms for talking the language of their



parents by an education system which teaches that knowledge of Scots history and classics helps nobody succeed in the land and institutions of their southern neighbours.

For 400 years Scots was only spoken and sung by the farmers, fishermen and working class of the cities, and written by a few hardy souls trying to learn from the literary gems of the past.

It was, and still is, marginalised; rejected by the educated, anglicised elite who even question its legitimacy as a language on account of its common roots and features with English.

Billy Kay - whose recently re-released study 'Scots: The Mither Tongue' describes the language's origins, development as a literary medium, and later erosion--argues that its distinctive and expanding vocabulary, as well as unique syntax and grammar, make it as distinct from English as Slovak is from Czech and Norwegian from Swedish. Kay, feeding on a rich diet of Ballads, Medieval Makars, Burns and Hugh MacDiarmid also believes it to be one of the world's most expressive languages where to hochmagandie is to fornicate, a snell-gabbit besom is a nagging woman and a snochter-dichter is a handkerchief.

"Even people who do not understand the language feel its power to communicate something profound in the human condition," Kay says. Then there is Edwin Muir's observation that Scots is a language of the heart while English is one of the head.

Scotland's ever-changing, often-harsh climate moved Alasdair Gray--the author of 'Lanark', probably the Great Scottish Novel of the 20th century--to point out that with its wealth of descriptive words for the weather like dreich, skolder, guster, skuther, hushle, tirl and gurl, Scots was rivalling the Inuit's stockpile of words for snow. But to explain the discords and doldrums of the language, a wee bit of history is needed.

When the Romans withdrew from Britain in the 5th Century, without having conquered Scotland's Picti (painted) tribes, waves of Germanic, Viking and Celtic tribes added their customs and tongues to the pot pourri of the Dark Ages.

Gaelic, brought from Ireland, became dominant across Scotland by the 11th century although Latin was still used for official State business. The Norman invasion of England in 1066 changed it all however. Germanic tribes, who had earlier settled in the southeast of Scotland and north-east of England, were pushed north into the young Scottish state and by the end of the 12th Century their language, the forerunner of both Scots and English, was dominant.

But unlike the Old English variant, which became influenced by the Normans' French, Scots drew its influences from Pictish, Gaelic and Norse tongues and developed in tandem with the fledgling nation. The wars between Scotland and England, erupting sporadically from the 13th century until 1745 when the final Jacobite rebellion was put down, allowed the Scots language to develop its character. War, being a great uniter of social classes, allowed the language to take root. As so often happens, great literature soon followed.

John Barbour's 'The Brus,' a heroic romp with Robert the Bruce through the 14th century Wars of Independence, written about ten years before Chaucer's 'The Canterbury Tales,' is the language's oldest surviving literary work. It laid the groundwork for the Medieval Makars of the 15th and 16th centuries led by William Dunbar, Robert Henryson and Gavin Douglas, whose powerful work--including the latter's translation of Virgil's Aeneid which many thought surpassed the original - was praised in seats of learning across Europe.

Considering the vitality of the description within Henryson's 'The Testament of Cresseid', it's hard to disagree with Kay's observation that Scots was then the equal of English and that it was no more true to say that Scots was a form of English than it would have been to say that English was a form of Scots.

"His face fronsit, his lyre was lyke the Leid **(wrinkled, complexion, like, lead)**
His teith chatterit, and cheverit with the Chin, **(teeth, shaked, shivered)**
His Ene drewpit, how sonkin in his heid, **(eyes, dropped, hollow, sounding, head)**
Out of his Nois and Meldrop fast can rin, **(nose, mucus, run)**
With lippis bla and cheikis leine and thin; **(lips,livid, cheeks, lean)**
The Iceschoklis that fra his hair doun hang **(icicles, from, down)**
Was wonder greit, and as ane spear al slang" **(great, one, throw)**

But the golden age was coming to an end and the Reformation, culminating in King James VI of Scotland inheriting the throne of England and moving his court to London, brought about the decline of the language, symbolised by the absence of a Scots translation of the Bible.

By the time of the Treaty of Union in 1707 English was the language needed for a successful career in the burgeoning British Empire.

Scots remained the vernacular of the farmers and fishermen; it was the language of Burns, the language of poetry and song while English had the classroom, courts and church.

The exclusion continued to strangle it. Robert Louis Stevenson said in 1887 that "the day draws near when this illustrious and malleable tongue shall be quite forgotten." And perhaps, without one whirling dervish of a writer born five years after Stevenson's prophecy; a man who had been thrown out of both the Scottish Nationalist and Communist parties and who could only get attention for his poems by writing their reviews himself under a different name, just perhaps it would have been.

Hugh MacDiarmid foraged through the ancient Scots classics and devoured the folk traditions of Burns and his peers to wrench the language from its miseries through invention, vigour and an astonishing understanding of its cadences.

Consider this celestial ditty 'The Bonnie Broukit Bairn' written in the 1920s.

"Mars is braw in crammasy, **(beautiful, crimson velvet)**
Venus in a green silk goun, **(dress)**
The auld mune shak's her gowden feathers, **(old, moon, golden)**
Their starry talk's a wheen o' blethers, **(empty speech)**
Nane for thee a thochtie sparin', **(nothing, thought)**
Earth, thou bonnie broukit bairn! **(broken, hurt, neglected)**
But greet, an in your tears ye'll droun **(cry, drown)**
The haill clanjamfrie" **(whole rabble)**

His talents reach a zenith with the mighty 'A Drunk Man Looks at a Thistle' when the inebriated protagonist says that with his use of Scots he will

"spire up syne by visible degrees **(rise, thereafter)**
To heichts whereo' the fules ha'e never recked. **(heights, fools, have, reached)**
But aince I get them there I'll whummle them **(once, overturn)**
And souse the craturs in the nether deeps," **(soak, creatures)**

MacDiarmid awoke the language and replenished it. He ignited a renaissance and deserves several letters written in his honour. But even though more writers in the 20th century began to use the voice of their ancestors and of the streets around them, and many works of fiction have sparkled with their uneasy "haufway hoose" of Scots dialogue and English narration, a lack of political will is again depriving Scots of oxygen.

Kay's 'Scots: The Mither Tongue' makes the point that the Scottish Parliament--set up with limited devolved powers within the UK in 1999--is happy to spend £10m on education and broadcasting for the country's 60,000 Gaelic speakers but will not take any positive action on behalf of Scots spoken, according to its own estimates, by 1.6m people.

All languages are important and deserve preservation efforts. But this one's personal. Scots is my language. Only fragments of it lay in my youth as the schools governed from hundreds of miles away sanitised our playground and textbooks and now, exiled in London, I rarely hear its distinctive whirring burr, certainly not on television, radio or in political debates.

One can always read MacDiarmid or Dunbar, Burns or Henryson, Some may even sing a ballad. But more need to remember that languages can be fragile. Without exposure, they can fade away.

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