



fiction

An Island Evening

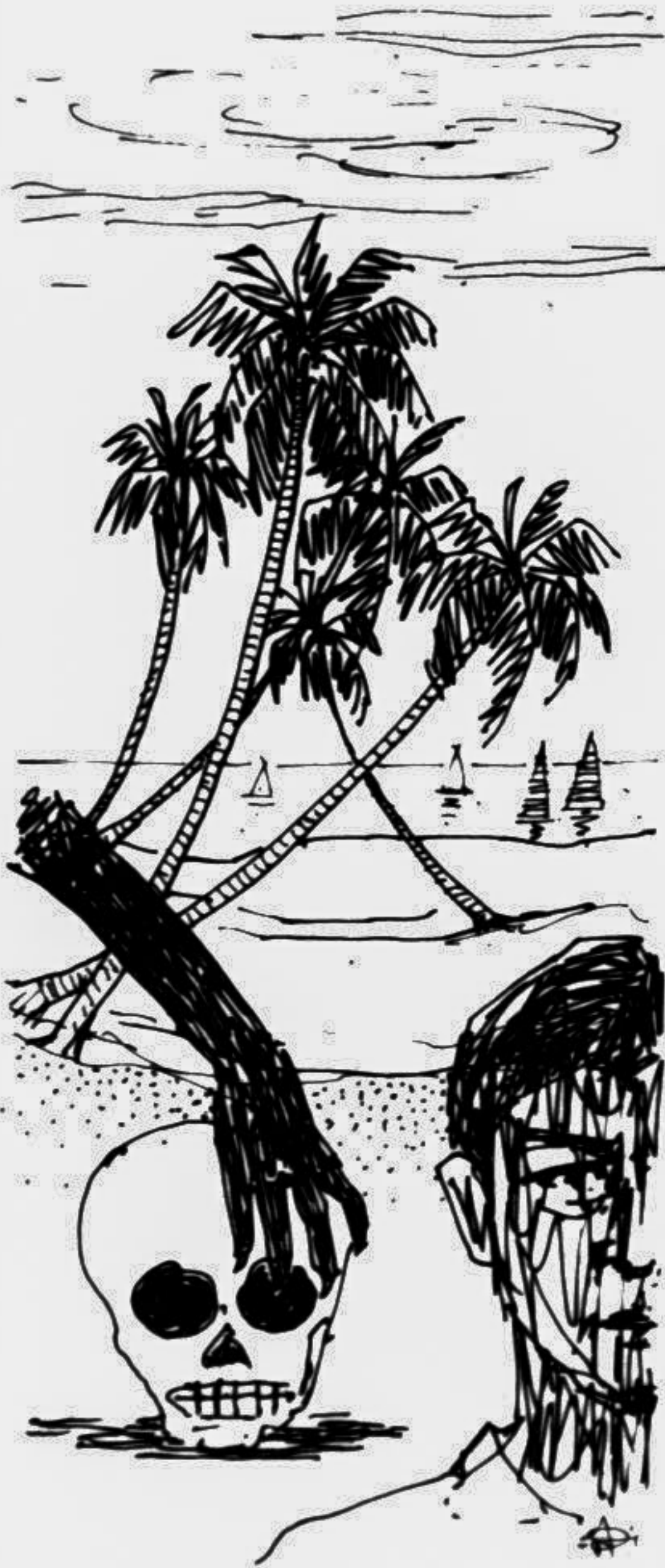
By Yuwa Hedrick-Wong

ALEX GOT OUT FIRST WHEN THE taxi stopped in front of the restaurant. He walked quickly over to the other side to help Francis Kotubalavu get out. The taxi driver sat glumly at his seat, not moving, waiting to be paid. Francis Kotubalavu climbed out from the back seat stiffly, his tall slim frame leaning on Alex's arm. He smiled, and in his old fashion gentlemanly way, said, "Those plantation boys played a tough game of tennis. I should never have played the third set." He fumbled in his pocket. "Now let me pay this good fellow who drove us here safely."

The taxi had taken only five minutes from Alex's hotel to the restaurant, going through what passed as the downtown of Honiara, a mile or so long of crumbling and dilapidated buildings. Honiara itself would have resembled a small market town that one encountered in so many nameless rural places in the tropic if not for the few glass and concrete ten storied highrises towering over the town. These were built by international donors and housed the government of Solomon Islands. They had the only elevators in the whole country, and it had become a popular coming-of-age rite for young teenagers to sneak past the door guards for a free elevator ride. Alex had seen the walls of the elevators covered with names, each carefully identifying who the writer was, time of the deed, and sometimes even the name of his home village.

The potholes on the road had been so bad that many times the driver had to steer the smoke-belching car onto the sidewalk to avoid them. The streets were crowded with throngs of barefoot, idle young men in T-shirts and shorts. Most congregated in front of small stores selling cold drinks, imported tinned fish and luncheon meat. Sitting immobile under the blistering sun, they stared vacantly at the dusty street, the few rusty trucks, and other young people like themselves. One kid, less than ten years old, wearing a torn T-shirt with "Kick Butt" emblazoned on the front, did make a half-hearted attempt to approach the taxi window to sell fly-covered cakes in a basket.

The Christina was reputed to be the best restaurant in Honiara, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands. It was a thatched-roofed wood and bamboo building by the sea. Alex could feel the rising ocean breeze as he crossed the neatly placed wooden planks that led to the restaurant. The oppressive heat that he had been feeling all day seemed to have



slightly lifted. The ocean, a channel between Guadalcanal and the islands to the north, was calm and a brilliant aquamarine.

Francis stopped in front of the entrance, ran his fingers through his closely cropped salt and pepper hair, chuckled and said, "I didn't mention earlier that my wife Lila owns and operates this place. It is her pride and joy." Alex had noticed right away, upon meeting Francis, that he spoke softly with a trace of an Australian accent instead of

the usual staccato island Pidgin. He later learned that it was a legacy from Francis' school days in Australia over fifty year ago. Now Francis was a senior minister in the government of Solomon Islands. His narrow face, high forehead, and a long aquiline nose made him look like a black Jesuit. This appearance was the complete opposite of the average Solomon Islander, who tended to be short, round in the face and body, with thick legs and huge feet. Alex was suddenly struck by how fond of this kind elderly gentleman he had grown in just a few days. He imagined that this sentiment was something that he would have felt for his father had he been able to get to know him before he died.

Lila greeted them at the door. She held Alex's hand briefly and said, "Francis has been telling everybody about you." She spoke very good English, but with the characteristic island lilt. She looked in her early thirties, plump, and had large bright eyes and soft brown skin. Alex, remembering that she was Francis' wife, was astounded by her youth. Francis kissed her affectionately on the cheeks. In a tight fitting yellow dress and high heels, Lila swayed ahead of them into the restaurant.

It was a large room with a high thatched-roof on bamboo rafters. The walls came only to waist height, with windows with wooden shutters rising from there to the ceiling. All windows were open now, and against the brilliant sunlight outside, the room looked dark and cool. Lila seated them at a window table that looked out over the channel. Through the sunny haze, one could make out the vague contours of the islands of Ngela and Tulagi to the right and the volcanic island of Savo to the left.

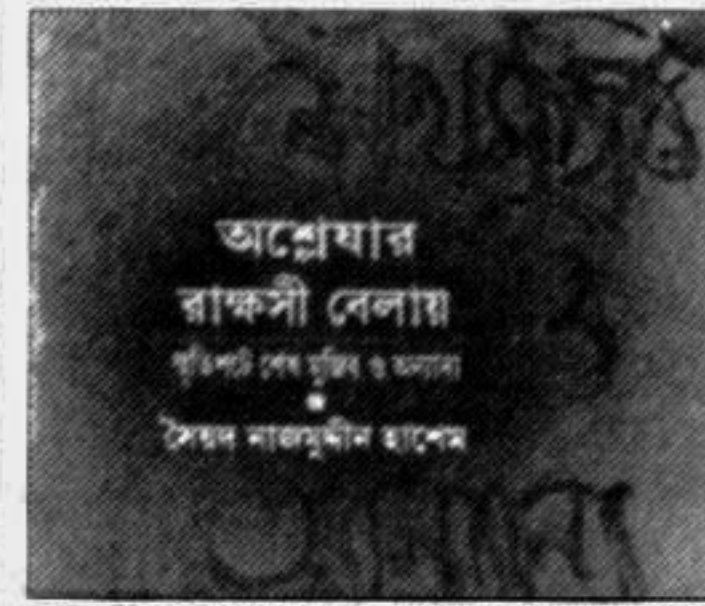
This channel was known as the Ironbottom Sound. From his reading of Second World War history, Alex knew that over sixty naval vessels had sunk here. Their carcasses still littered the ocean floor. It was here in Guadalcanal that the Americans turned back the Japanese tide in the Pacific. Looking at the channel now, Alex couldn't help imagining how battle ships, cruisers, destroyers must have torpedoed, clashed and fired at each other, steel erupting in flame, with thousands roasting in the floating infernos or drowning at sea. And the sharks. Alex shuddered as he stared at the serene and limpid blue water. Lila's high pitched laughter brought him back to the present.

About the writer Yuwa Hedrick-Wong is with Horizon Pacific International (Bangladesh) Ltd. To be continued

books

Ashleshar Rakshashi Belai (II)

Translated by Sonia Nishat Amin



Waliullah: Images

ALTHOUGH I WAS endeared by the warmth and hospitality of our good teacher Ahmed Ali, the feudal, north Indian gentleness he cultivated always struck me as over done and empty. As such his dilettantish, shallow art criticism made me quite impatient. I told him so, one day at his residence in the aristocratic quarter of town: "You will never be able to emulate Bishnu De. So rather than hanker after fame in unfamiliar territory, why not be content with the (dim!) glow of your Penny publication 'Elliot's Penny World of Dreams.'"

When I told Wali Bhai what I had said, he agreed, but reprimanded me affectionately, for such behaviour towards a teacher. He said provocatively — "Do you have the same opinion of me as a painter and art-critic?" (Waliullah used to paint book covers). "Your expressionist paintings may be suitable for book covers, but as an art-critic you will go far, I believe. Consider your comment on Shaifuddin's painting *Parabat* — ... 'the painting is seeped in a melancholy remoteness that draws the viewer'. Now, that speaks of your deep, penetrating eye."

Waliullah would blush, when he felt pleased, I remember that finely etched face — Waliullah sitting atop a tomb in the Christian Cemetery at Park Circus where we would often meet, under the setting sun.

A few days before partition (1947), Chief Minister of Bengal Shahid Suhrawardy, and secular

Congress leaders Sarat Chandra Bose and Kiran-shankar Ray, were all eager to counter the suicidal path of dividing Bengal, undertaken by Jinnah and Nehru.

The counter 'greater Bengal' movement struck me as too little too late. I saw Wali Bhai agitated and disturbed by the Jinnah-Nehru stance, for the first and last time in my life. I felt this last moment dash to counter Jinnah-Nehru — was amateurish. When Miah, Bibi Razi Keya Karega Kazi — Miah being the British, the Bibis being Muslim League, and Congress — all were agreed to barter home and house, land and property — then what was the use of last moment counter-moves, I argued, Wali Bhai, idealist that he was, could not take my criticism of Suhrawardy though his reason told him the integrity of such leaders was questionable. I reminded Wali Bhai that Suhrawardy had engineered through his Deputy Commissioner of Police Mr Doha, the infamous Hindu-Muslim riot in Calcutta a few months back, to step up the Pakistan Movement. And here he was, participating in the greater Bengal Movement too! Waliullah was also at a loss to refute my contention that the escalation of terror in the mind of the Hindu middle class in Calcutta and Noakhali following communal riots, had made partition inevitable.

Still, I accompanied him to a political meeting a few days later, at his request. I remember being deeply impressed by Monu Kabir's address that day. In simple words Monu's argument ran thus: If the port of Calcutta and East Bengal are separated from each other — Calcutta/West Bengal would pass into the hands of Marwaris and East Bengal would become dominated by Memon-Punjabi predators. The exogenous predators would have an understanding and agenda of exploiting Bengal despite

apparent political animosity. History has proved Monu right.

Wali Bhai, excited had exclaimed that day — "Gokhales comment is true, my dear. What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow."

Unmoved, I threw damp water on this and replied "Far truer is historian Kettleby's statement: When Bengal sneezes India catches cold. The malaise that has been deliberately produced by injecting the germ of communalism in our social body — will torment us all — the innocent as well as the guilty!" I saw my words bear bitter fruit once more in 1971.

India was partitioned. At Zainul Abedin's entreaty Waliullah moved to Dhaka and took up a job with the news section of the Radio service. He set up abode in a small room on the upper floor of the office at Nimtali. He would hand over his inadequate salary each month to his Chaprasi 'Chhote Khan' who would then disburse therefrom chapatti, curry, daal, and cigarettes, per requirement. I was posted in Chittagong with the Daily Azad as News reporter. Syed Nuruddin was the Dhaka correspondent for the Calcutta based "Ittehad," Zahur Hussain Chowdhury hand in hand with the scintillating Shishir Bhadhuri, somewhere in old Dhaka; Monu Kabir manager of State Bank in Chittagong; the duo AKM Ahsan and Al Mamun Sanaul Huq had put up with Monu in his colonial hill-top bungalow, swotting for the Civil Service exam night and day. Shawkat Osman was undisputed lord over a small ring of Chittagong intellectuals and litterateurs; Kalim Sharafi was busy trying to reproduce the Calcutta theatre and arts movement there; in Dhaka Abul Hussain and Ahsan Habib, Syed Ali Ahsan and Farrukh Ahmed were engaged in whipping up the

Bangali versus Pakistani discourse debate, through mutually exclusive streams of poetry. Munir Chowdhury was at his peak as dramatist, Professor Mozaffar Ahmed Chowdhury, still green then, barely had time to look up from his tomes on political economy in his small university office room. It was all glorious confusion and clamour.

In the midst of which I would seek refuge, on occasion, in Waliullah's small room.

He was like a skilled, tireless diver hunting for pearls forever in the endless depths of the ocean of knowledge and art.

There was but one problem and that was familial. The two brothers Nasrullah and Waliullah were both unmarried at the time. They were very close to each other. Now, Nasrullah was convinced that he was suffering from some incurable disease — and his brother believed in this as if it were gospel truth. Off Nasrullah would go to Calcutta for treatment, every other month — now for TB now for some deadly disease — trips which resulted in waste of time and money. The famed Calcutta physicians, including Dr. Mont De, were dismissed by the two brothers as quacks, for the unforgivable act of declaring Nasrullah totally healthy and free of disease!

Wali Bhai was coerced into a government job by wellwisher "Sputnik". I too, drifted along somehow, into the post of Assistant Editor in the Radio Department, around the close of 1948, thus taking leave of student politics and all that. The following year the Information desk of the Radio department was shifted to Karachi and thence we were headed.

In the jaws of an ill-starred time: Remembering Sheikh Mujib and Others by Syed Najimuddin Hashim

About the writer: Dr Sonia N Amin, Associate Professor of history at Dhaka University.

poem

I am Not the Last Man

by Zahid Haider

You are the last one to come.
Tell me, what did you see?

No, I am not the last man.
There was one behind me,
Far, far behind me.

No, no you've been the last man.
Tell me, what did you see?

It was morning, a wonderful morning...
And birds rose from their sleep, too.
Rain came to the perched land
And I heard the voice of man.

You are lying.
Didn't you see war — war in the name of peace?
The exultation of destroying green woodlands?

I've seen
Fountains
Free flowing fountains
And a bunch of happy wings flying in the sky.

You wait.
There is another man coming...
I am not the last one.

Translated by S. Marzoorul Islam

exhibition

Ironies Behind the Facade

by Fayza Haq



MOVING AWAY FROM the conventional vogue of creating boxes and bowls of papier mache Aditya Chakravarti has made pieces of sculpture and paintings from pieces of simple sheets of newspaper. The base for the 31 sculptures and paintings seen at La Galerie are simply sheets of newspaper that have been painted and glossed over. The newspapers, at times has been allowed to retain the original print which forms a part of composition. These sheets have often been made to look like cloth, keeping with the spirit of the humorous undertone. The artist has also used masks which arise from the folk art of India. They have been used to depict facades and attempts to cover them up.

Aditya, explaining her interest in papier mache, says, "Just before coming to Dhaka, I was at Geneva,

dabbling with clay in La Salle Communale. There I saw people working with papier mache. I found it great fun because one could make whatever one wanted. One day one of my paper dishes got squashed and I let it dry as it was: the result was satisfactory. Either you reduce the paper to a pulp and mould it like clay or you tear off bits and keep layering them.

"I have used whole sheets of newspaper and stuck one on top of the other. I have never formally learnt the technique of papier mache. This, at the exhibition, is what I have reached upon after a fair bit of trial and error. I wanted to give paper shape with a lot of movement in it. If paper could be given shape it would bring two opposites together — as it is the paper appears like cloth. It is painted over with flat acrylic with varnish on top. The coating of varnish is primarily to make it wa-

ter proof.

Speaking particularly of her symbolisms she says, "What I feel is that almost every person has a 'face' that they present to people. Some have light faces others have heavy. Beyond the facade there can just be about anything.

"Shrouds" mean to tell the viewer that people hide behind their jobs, an open smile, or plenty of laughter. People are not what they might appear to be. The mask is made of dynamic blue, black and amber while the hollows in the eyes are made of bits of paper. This overwhelming mask is surrounded by sombre swirls of more papier mache.

In "Chinese Whisper" the masks represent people, and what has come out of their discussion is that the truth has been distorted beyond hope. The masks are angular, black and white while the background is a scintillating combination of burnt

sienna, ochre and cobalt. In parts of the background the newspaper has been left in the original form and this gives colour and texture.

Equally dramatic is "Composition" where the red central mask is surrounded by strips of rectangular paper. "Cover up" delineates the impression of two bits of cloth that are being stitched together with great force with a giant needle and black thread. Here again we see an attempt to cover up and camouflage what is in the background.

"All knotted up denotes the keyed up nerves of the average person". Each person has some point of tension. Here I depict a group of people sitting on the same platform each one of whom

has some cause of tension," Aditya explains.

"Interdependence" wishes to depict that no person can live by himself. The intertwining blue and green support each other. There are twines of orange circling the two mingling abstract figures.

In "The Luncheon" painted plates and dishes are spread out on a narrow blue table cloth also of paper. This is placed on an orange table.

"Patch up" has a fan made of interlacing paper of different shades of blue. The wood-like handle is also made of paper with brilliant strings coming out of it.

"Am I in the Picture" has four rectangular cracked glasses covered with mounts

of papier mache." If you look into the four you don't see anything but disjointed pieces. There are many aspects of a person. Seeming in the four mirrors you see only parts of yourself. All the pieces have numerous folds and they represent life," the artist explains. "Nurturing" is a huge bird formed out of two sheets of paper. "This is an object that can move away from you. You try to hold and keep it," Aditya elaborates.

Aditya has done commercial art in New Delhi. She further studied the Xie Yi bold brush work in Beijing under Sue Shiqi of the China Academy of Fine Arts. She has held exhibitions earlier at New Delhi and Beijing.

