

fiction

Muddy Waters

by nupu chaudhuri

It was nine that summer and my cousin Putul was ten. We went to Sylhet for three days to visit our grandparents in the middle of the scorching June heat. My mother packed my dresses in the corner of her suitcase, crammed with gifts and clothes for relatives. Putul wore a new watch with a blue plastic band.

We got on a train in Dhaka, along with eleven other cousins, assorted aunts and uncles, overstuffed suitcases and sweetmeats in soggy boxes tied with pink string. My parents let me sit in the same compartment as my cousins. Putul was quieter that summer, I remember. She moodily picked at a scab on her knee and talked of returning to Dhaka early, as if her parents would allow such a thing.

Putul's elder sister, Jesmeen Apa, was also in our compartment. I had heard all my life that she was the beautiful one, so I never thought to question it. And as I watched her gaze out the window at endless fields, I began to believe it. Her straight black hair fell to her waist, her nose was small and sharp, and her eyes were huge and beautiful. She delicately picked at the chana-chur that was presented by our uncle, the one who always took us out for ice-cream. Jesmeen Apa picked out the peanuts and put them aside, which astonished me; she was so different from Putul and I, that she seemed to belong to another generation.

Putul took the discarded peanuts and stuffed them in her mouth. She soon cheered up and said that this summer was going to be fun, as Dada was too ill to give us lectures on how we should be reading the Qur'an. I hadn't seen Dada since the previous summer when he had visited Dhaka with Dadi to attend Putul's brother's wedding. Dada carried a wooden cane which tapped threateningly against the floor when he walked; the sound gave us a chance to flee if we heard it down the corridor. I remembered even less of Dadi, who was tiny with a shrivelled face, peaking from under a cotton sari's achol pulled over her head. My father was so different from both his parents that I knew he and my mother would never become like them.

We finally reached Sylhet, where several cars were waiting to take us to Dada's house. Everything was very chaotic with everyone talking at the

same time, sweetmeat boxes getting accidentally squashed, and all the female cousins hurriedly pulling their chiffon scarves over their heads as we approached Dada's large property.

All the Sylhet relatives pinched my cheeks and talked of how I'd grown. Putul and I sat on cane chairs on the open passageway which curved around the courtyard with lime trees.

My mother came and took us to see Dadi. She was lying sideways on a bed, more tiny and wrinkled than I remembered. I touched her feet after my mother sent me a warning look. Dadi stared at some point behind me and I saw saliva slip out of her mouth. Putul came and gave her salaam, which Dadi appeared to acknowledge by feebly raising an arm. Her sari lifted and we caught a glimpse of the saggy crinkled skin of her underarm. We meekly left the room, but once outside, we ran under the lime trees, both shrieking with repulsion.

When the adults realised we had disappeared, Putul's mother came and fetched us to see Dada. The room was crowded with most of the relatives who had come with us from Dhaka, but no one spoke louder than a whisper. Dada was lying on his bed, weak and pale. He acknowledged my salaam with a frown then once more, Putul and I ran outside.

The cook let us pick chili peppers for lunch and gave us puffed rice-balls coated with molasses as a snack. We sat outside, which was different from Dhaka where we always stayed inside air-conditioned rooms. The aunts and uncles sat with Dada and Dadi as the cousins mingled in the courtyard. The older male ones — most of whom sported revolting moustaches — talked of business and politics. The young women sat together, gossiping about absent cousins and admiring Jesmeen Apa's pink nail-polish until she became embarrassed and slipped back inside.

Putul and I went for a walk through a thick clutter of unkempt trees to see the chickens and ducks. The chickens were inside the hen-house for their afternoon nap so we made our way down an overgrown grassy slope to the large pond where we used to watch our older male cousins fish in previous summers. To our disappointment, there was a fence around our side, its wire mesh reflected in the muddy water with bits of wood and garbage floating in it.

We heard our names being called and we looked at each other, resigned that we would never be able to enjoy some peace. Our fussy cousin Dolly Apa came towards us, exclaiming we were near the polluted waters and took us back to the house for lunch. Dolly Apa's scarf trailed behind her and got caught on a piece of bark jutting from a tree which ripped the flimsy fabric into two narrow pieces. Putul and I tried to suppress our giggles as Dolly Apa walked back to the house, finally silent as she crossed her arms over the front of her cotton shalwar-kameez suit.

The older aunts and uncles sat around a large wooden table in the kitchen for lunch while the rest of us took our plates into various rooms. I picked at my soft boiled rice and chicken ruined by heavy grease and too many spices. Putul ate everything on her plate then all the sweetmeats offered to her. I tried to eat mine, the light syrup inside trickling down my arm.

We looked at a locked bookshelf with a glass door that held large dusty books and photo albums. I had seen pictures in albums we had in Dhaka, taken of my parents when they were young, including some of my father in the Sylhet house. He looked funny with his trousers pulled high on his waist, standing arm in arm with his six brothers and four sisters. He always talked of his childhood in Sylhet: how he would do his homework in the dim glow of a kerosine lamp as they didn't have electricity then; how he and his brothers would walk miles over hilly terrains to and from school every day; how he would swim every afternoon in the pond by the house.

I went with Putul, her mother, and some other aunts to visit Dada's niece who lived next door. We walked around the pond to the other side, reaching a similarly designed U-shaped house, all rooms opening to a small courtyard. There were extra beds set up to accommodate the male cousins who would be sleeping there that night. Putul and I became restless and we went outside.

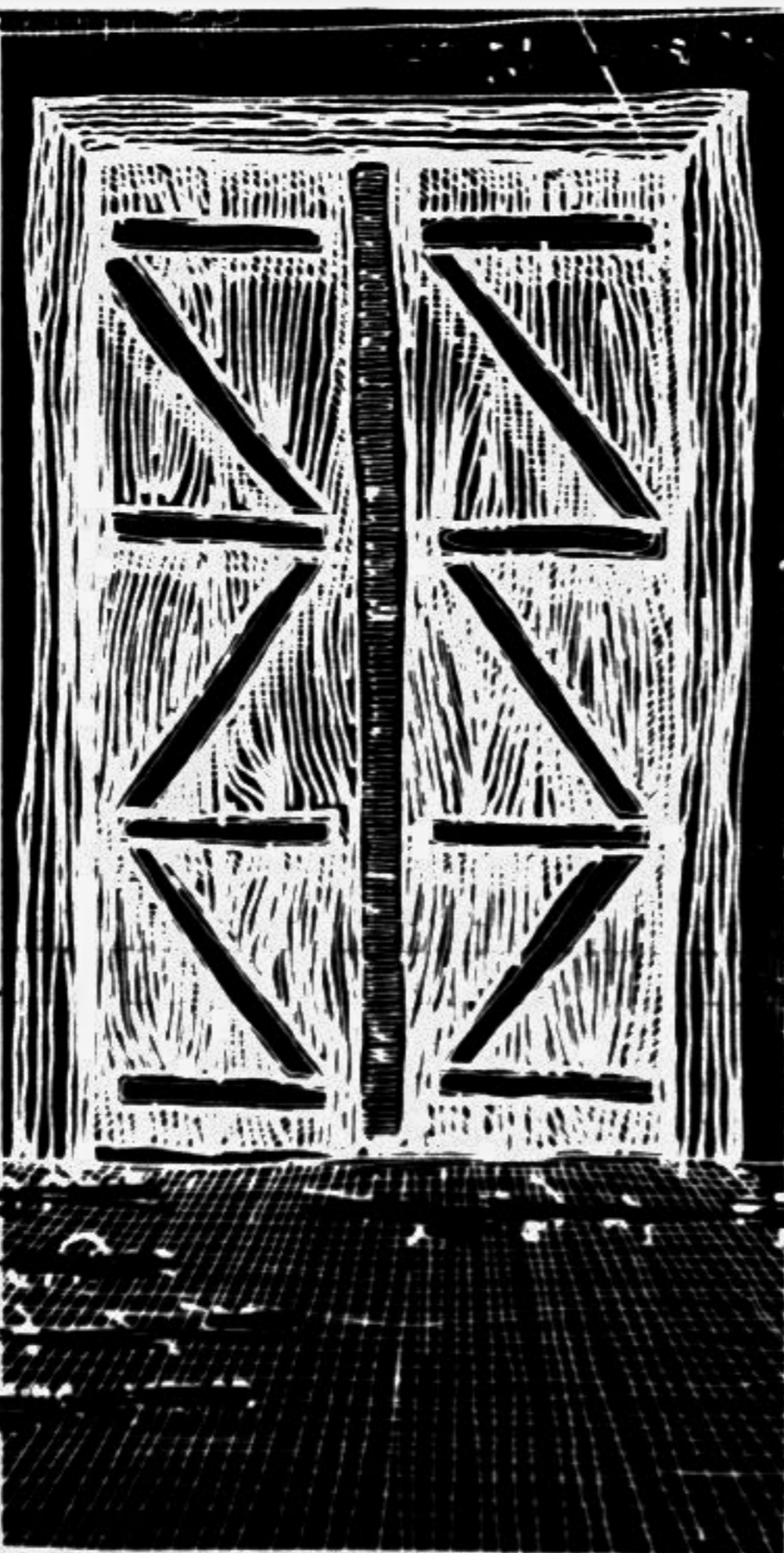
Someone had mentioned that Dada's niece was renting out a corner room of an adjoining house to a local school-teacher. We passed the window and saw a young man dressed in a white kurta, writing at a table. He saw us and smiled in a distracted manner. We quickly walked away, giggling to each other. Putul picked some flowers and as we passed his window again, she threw them inside. Some of the flowers hit the

metal grill and fell to the ground by our feet. We ran back into the house, flushed and laughing. Putul made me promise not to tell anyone and I solemnly agreed, thrilled she trusted me with a secret.

During dinner, Putul became quiet again and I tried to think of ways to enmuddy waters

gauge her in conversation. Failing that, I asked an aunt if we could look at some photo albums from the bookshelf. She dismissed me with a wave of her hand, saying they couldn't find the key to open it. I offered Putul some of my dessert, but she shrugged and said hostilely that I was just a baby. She left the room and I sat back, hurt, bewildered, and a little afraid of losing her friendship.

I listened to the older cousins discuss servant dilemmas and their husbands' digestive problems. One cousin, Lina Apa, delicately mentioned that her young son Babu was asking how his expected sibling 'was happening'. Everyone clicked their tongues in sympathy and said it was so difficult to explain,



Dolly Apa giving loud disapproving sighs. I waited curiously, hoping they would continue the conversation so I could finally hear what I was too afraid to ask. As people began to put their plates away, Babu came crying into the room, an itchy red rash on his legs.

Lina Apa scolded him and began to hunt for medicine in her bag. I caught a glimpse of her ballooning belly under the starched sari she was wearing.

Putul still had not come back. I went to Lina Apa and asked, "So, how did it happen?" I knew Putul would be impressed by my boldness.

Lily Apa began to apply an ointment on Babu's legs and said distractedly to me: "That muddy pond. Stay away from it or you'll get infected if you go in, too."

I ran to find Putul and dragged her to a corner of a room and told her. She refused to believe me, though I could see her eyeing me with reluctant admiration; even she could never have been so brazen as to ask what I did. I explained that it had to be true because Dada and Dadi had so many children and they lived right next to the pond. And that was why our parents had so few, because they had moved away to Dhaka. Putul immediately looked ashamed and said "toba toba toba" while lightly slapping her cheeks. I felt ashamed too, though I was not sure why. The question of where babies came from were somehow taboo, yet we were delighted to finally uncover the mystery.

It felt strange to sleep in the Sylhet house that night. I tried to talk to Putul who was lying next to me, but she fell asleep as soon as the light was switched off. There were noises from animals outside the windows, and the roof creaked, as if a burglar was trying to break in. The ceiling fan whirled noisily and a mosquito net over the bed billowed near my legs when I kicked off my bedsheets. I finally fell asleep as my father in the next room began his rhythmic snoring.

The next morning was less humid and very clear. My mother made me bathe in the washroom with the small hole in the stone floor that ran straight to the outside drain. The water was cold but I felt too shy to ask for hot water to add to the bucket, as Putul hadn't complained during her bath. Instead, I dipped the metal container into the matching bucket and splashed some water on my hair where it would show, and on my towel. A cow stared at me

through the open window as I put on a clean dress. I covered the window with the towel as I used the toilet, then went to the kitchen to eat breakfast.

Later, Putul and I played 'imitate' where we secretly imitated our relatives. It was more enjoyable playing the game in Sylhet where there seemed to be an abundance of feigned politeness, whiny voices and cackling laughter.

After lunch, our fathers went to see Dada's niece from across the pond; Putul and I immediately decided to accompany them. Putul even changed her dress to a smart collared one with an eyellet embroidery trim. She told me to comb my hair, which I did, and we walked over determinedly. Putul picked small objects on the way: a piece of fabric, several small pretty pebbles and more wild flowers. Once our fathers were safely inside the house, we hurried over to the school-teacher's room. He was by his window again, writing at his table. He saw us and looked mildly startled. Putul threw her gifts through the window then we ran away.

When we returned to Dada's house, Putul hurried into the bathroom, bursting from the grapefruit juice she had had earlier. I passed Dada's room and saw the sweeper boy turn Dada to his side. I watched, paralysed, as the boy cleaned my grandfather then rearranged him on his back. He removed a pail from under the bed, which had tubes dropping in, and placed the tubes in an empty metal pail with which he replaced the old one. He left the room through the other door which led out to the fields. I heard him empty the contents into an open drain which ran along the outside wall.

I went to my mother and put my arms around her. She held me as she talked to my aunt, the one who always criticised everyone. The aunt looked at me and told my mother I was becoming spoiled. My mother pulled me close and said I was not used to Sylhet. My aunt sniffed disapprovingly, then remarked that Putul was getting too old to be running around in dresses, that she should start to wear shalwar-kameezes which would cover her properly. I looked sullenly at my aunt and said that the older girls in my school wore skirt uniforms. My mother gently told me to play outside with Putul. I left the room, feeling uncomfortable and irritated.

I found Putul outside looking for flintstones in the fields. It was only late afternoon so there was too much sunlight to be able to see which stones sparked. We kept running inside the rooms, to the dark space between an open door and the wall, and rubbed them together. I loved watching the magic sparks fly out in the darkness. We gathered many small smooth flintstones, and I found a large beautiful one.



muddy waters

I put it in the corner of my father's bag and told him I had put it there to take home to Dhaka. My uncle, who was sitting with him, turned to me and asked in a baby voice why flintstones didn't grow in Dhaka. I told him tartly that the stones didn't grow in Sylhet either. I left the room as he roared with laughter; they treated me like I was four.

Putul and I were given an early dinner which we ate at the kitchen table. The toothless senile Bua in the corner smiled and chattered away to us in Sylhet as she peeled potatoes. I felt Putul kick my foot. We kept kicking each other under the table, especially when the Bua laughed in the middle of her speech, as if she was conversing with someone. I suddenly felt something furry against my bare foot and screamed as I kicked it hard. Something flew out yelping from under the table and my mother came running into the kitchen. I caught Putul's scornful glance in my direction as my mother squeezed my hand and said it was the

cat, and that cats in Sylhet liked to sit under tables so they could eat the food that I accidentally dropped. I was still trembling and couldn't finish my meal.

As the adults sat down to have dinner, Putul dragged me outside and said we would go to see the school-teacher under the pretense that we were going to the hen-house. I was a little scared to walk that far as it was getting dark, and there were too many insects which came out at night. I obliged, though, knowing it was important to Putul and feeling proud to be a co-conspirator in her secret mission.

We set off immediately, walking along the slippery grass slopes, both of us silent as the air became still and our voices carried. We were about to make a curve around the pond when we suddenly stopped, both of us stunned by a bizarre sight: the school-teacher was standing still at the edge of the pond, his kurta's pyjama rolled up to his knees. He entered the muddy water and slowly waded across, his silhouette against the setting sun. Before he reached the other side, we saw a figure come out from the bushes and step into the water, as if to greet him. It was Jesmeen Apa. Putul gasped, and we both ran with dizzying speed back to Dada's house, nearly tripping over tree stumps and small animals.

Neither of us spoke a word, even after we fell onto a bed without turning on the fan. After a long time, I finally asked, "What will your mother do when she finds out?"

Putul said curtly, "Finds what out?" "That Jesmeen Apa will have a baby, even though she's not married." Putul said stubbornly, "Apa will not have a baby."

"We saw her go into the muddy pond. Putul, Lina Apa told me that's how she got infected," I said with authority. Putul scrunched up her face, refusing to show any emotion, and staring at the ceiling. She said, "Turn on the fan."

That night, I asked my mother if I could sleep in their bed as Putul had pulled my bedsheets away from me the night before. My mother laughed for my still wanting to sleep with them, but she took out an extra bedsheets for me. When I was much younger, I used to want to sleep in between my parents because it was comforting to have them on either side of me. My favourite, though, was when I laid next to my mother during her afternoon naps because she slept with her sari on; I would wrap my arm around her waist, bare between her blouse and petticoat. At night, she wore a long, loose night-dress.

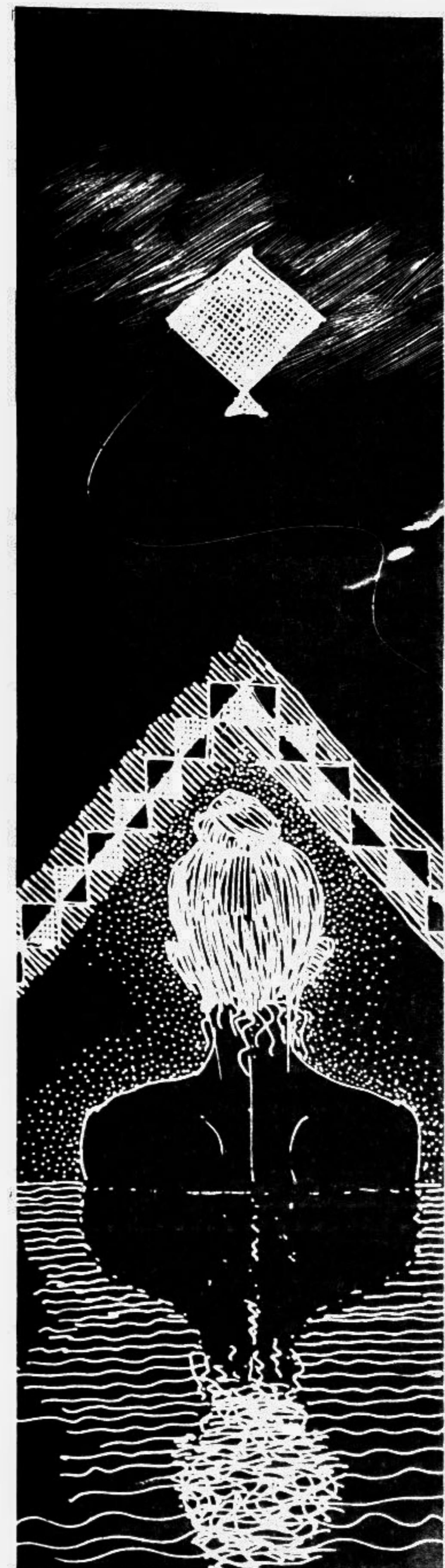
I felt relieved as I lay next to her that night, not as tense as I would have been if I had slept in Putul's bed. I felt that she was resentful that I had seen Jesmeen Apa and the school-teacher together; that I, too, knew a dirty secret that was supposed to be Putul's alone. Putul was not only my cousin, but my best friend, though I knew that she sometimes thought I was too young to play with her properly. I enjoyed her attention, but also felt that I would always be the baby, especially since she had pointed out that no matter how old I was, she would always be older.

The next morning, the sky was yellow with humidity and this time, I splashed the cold water over my body and mooded back at the cow outside the window. We ate a large breakfast of fried dough porotas, eggs and cooked vegetables. The porotas were thick and heavy, unlike the ones my mother made at home in Dhaka with the top layers which would come off in crusty flakes. Everyone talked of the sweetmeats they would have to take back to Dhaka later that day and prepared to pack them.

The men, as usual, separated themselves once the meal was over and went to have their tea in the room with the locked bookshelf. The women crowded into Dadi's room, elbows jostling as they drank their morning tea. The relatives who lived in Sylhet began to sniff sadly and said it was wonderful to have had all of us visit, and how nice it would have been if we stayed longer.

I watched Jesmeen Apa sit quietly in a corner, wondering how she would look with a big belly. She wouldn't be as beautiful as she looked then, slender and small. Dada's niece, who was over at the house, turned to Jesmeen Apa and said that it was sweet of her to return so soon after her recent trip to spend time with Dada and Dadi. Putul and I exchanged glances; we knew better. Another aunt began to talk of how Jesmeen Apa was so fair and pretty, it would be no problem finding a husband for her, especially as she would soon be finishing college. Within minutes, all the aunts began to think aloud of prospective husbands for Jesmeen Apa who sat there, becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

Putul began to fidget in her seat; I suspected she felt just as uncomfortable



as no-one ever said she was fair or muddy waters

pretty. Then she did the unthinkable; she blurted out, "Apa's having a baby!"

Everyone gasped and Jesmeen Apa immediately left the room. Her mother paused then left behind her. All the aunts remained silent, though I could see a look of perverse pleasure spreading across their faces. Dadi stared at the wall, her body twitching under her sari. I was sitting next to her on the bed, and I felt the thin bedsheets quiver.

Putul slipped out of the room and I followed her. She leaned against a wall with tears streaming down her face as she whimpered. I had never seen her like that before. Something shifted in my perspective about our friendship as I eyed her silently. I felt strangely unsympathetic and almost disgusted towards her; she had ruined her sister's life, after all, not her own.

I walked away and went to the cow standing outside the bathroom window. It seemed much bigger when I stood next to it. It stared at me with an unconcerned expression as it mechanically chewed grass. I stayed with the cow for the rest of the morning, relieved to be away from the tension of the house.

We all took the early train back to Dhaka that afternoon. No one passed chana-chur and no men dared to enter our compartment, where Jesmeen Apa sat stone-faced in the corner. Putul sat with her mother in another compartment. My mother came to give us puffed rice mixed with mustard oil, chopped onions and green chili peppers which she had prepared herself before leaving Sylhet. I sat back in my seat next to the window with a small bowl in my lap, and gazed at the moving fields, small herds of cattle, and muddy waters.

Within weeks, Putul's mother arranged a marriage between Jesmeen Apa and a young professor at Dhaka University. He quite resembled the school teacher, I thought, though the professor earned more money and came from a reputable family. Just under nine months later, Jesmeen Apa had a 'premature' baby: a girl who all our relatives loudly claimed looked exactly like her beautiful mother. No one in our family ever mentioned the incident in Sylhet. Putul, especially, seemed to have a memory lapse. I never said a word, either; I could keep a secret.

