



poems

Poems from Rupushi Bangla by Jibananda Das (New translation)

As Long as I Live..... (Jatandin Beche Ach)

As long as I live, I'd like to keep seeing the sky wandering
 Into some distant sky, blue as aparajita vines — or even bluer!
 I'd like to see morning herons and kingfishers wing the sky from their wings
 And fly afar in Ashwin's autumnal sky — I'd like to sit down on Bengal's grass,
 Having roamed the world with a soul saddened by the passage of time,
 I'd like to wend my way with the Dhanshiri River into cremation grounds,
 Where with disheveled hair, the poet Ramprasad's Shama still appears,
 Where some beautiful woman's corpse, clad in an embroidery-bordered sari,
 Mounts a sandalwood funeral pyre — where parrots on mango branches keep mum,
 Where you can see the most beautiful things — the most melancholy ones too,
 Where the lotus withers — where the benign goddess Bishalakhshi is hushed,
 Where once the lovely ladies Sankhamala, Chandramala, Manikmala
 Used to make their bangles ring, alas, will those bangles ring our ever again!

One day I'll lie down.... (Ekdin Jalshiri Naditir)

One day I'll lie down in a field in Bengal under a shriveled banyan tree
 Next to a Jalshiri River bank — then red fruits will drop off softly
 Onto the desolate grass like fur falling — then the horned moon will be wide awake—
 Then the river water will strike the door of goddess Bishalakhshi's shrine,
 Like a timorous Bengali maiden — then in a ruined ghat bereft of beauties,
 Where jute rots continuously; where like a female goblin
 Tied up in a cluster of kalimi plants, someone moans throughout the night—
 I'll behold all of a sudden people preparing a funeral pyre

Bengal's startled monsoon sky will look on at this strange scene;
 With wide open placid eyes, the wet owl will tell the story of goddess Laxmi
 In the kadam forest — the river will be singing Vashan songs softly,
 Everywhere Bengal's dhani saris will lie strewn — white branches too—
 A blue monastery wrapped up in Bengal's grass, akand trees and vasak vines,
 Will disintegrate slowly — to the tune of these wondrous outbursts!

Ah bird..... (Hei Pakhi Ekdin)

Ah bird, weren't you at Kalidaha once — didn't you cry out
 In the swirling afternoon wind as the heated waters churned
 In the monsoonal month of Ashar? All day long, while the thunder rolled
 Through the overcast sky, I thought of Chand Saudagar's honeycombed barge;
 Of the time when it drowned in the Kalidaha whirlpool in a storm—
 Hadn't countless birds whirled over the dark currents of air that day too?
 The flock of river gulls on the Dhaleswari sandbanks all day long today
 Makes one think of that scene in the Kalidaha River long ago.

These birds don't seem to belong to this day and age at all —
 No — this Dhaleswari appears to be from another world — this sky too!
 Could the snake-goddess Manasa live in this cobra-hooded cactus grove?
 It would seem she does. Is this the Kalidaha? Ah, do I see Sanaka's face
 In that ghat, hair all undone? Whatever is sad, pale, and worn out
 Must be true; your dream too, Manasa herself seems to be saying!

Life or Death (Jiban O Mritu)

Life or death will be in my sight — and Bengal's grass on my bosom,
 This grass where Sitaram, Rajram, Ramnath Roy's steeds
 Still part this grass in darkness; this grass where Kankabati and Shankhamala
 Still keep lying, the smell of their bodies, the fragrance of their faded hair,
 Redolent of champak flowers, still cling to the grass;
 When in antique Bengali afternoons in the autumnal month of Kartik,
 While Hijal leaves keep falling into the white courtyard,
 When ducks leave the exhausted pondwater and take off,
 I keep lying in the heart of this grass — shalk birds wring dry
 Their soft yellow legs in this grass; moist dust lie underneath
 This grass — bherenda flower-bumble bees brush their mirror-like wings
 On this grass — here where oleander flowers shed their white petals,
 Some maiden came and from an oleander a flower plucked,
 The oleander still oozes milk into the grass — anxiously, languorously!

As the Seven Stars..... (Akeshe Satiti Tara)

As the seven stars of the sky arise I sit down on this grass,
 Kamranga red fruits, like dead monia birds, have drowned
 In the Ganga estuary waves — Bengal's placid compliant blue
 Evening has set in — as if a maiden with flowing tresses
 Has appeared in the sky — Her tresses float before my eyes—
 Haven't seen a maiden like her anywhere in the world — haven't seen
 Such streaming tresses kissing Hijal, Jam, and Jackfruit trees — didn't know
 Such delicate scents shed when beautiful women dress their tresses.

Nowhere in the world — such delicate smells of soft rice, kalimi plants,
 Duck feathers, reeds, pond water, chanda and sharputi fish,
 Such delicate smells of a girl's hands, moist and cold from straining rice,
 Of a boy's feet redolent of the grass he trod on — the anguished smell
 And exhausted silences of red banyan-tree fruits — as the seven stars arise,
 I hear Bengal's heart beating amidst these sights and smells.

Haven't seen Anywhere (Kothao Dekhini)

Haven't seen anywhere, alas, such a stretch of desolate grass
 Looking at the horizon's edge with soft sad eyes — on its blue bosom
 Dragonflies nest; green beetles, butterflies, shyampokas too;
 Listless hijal tree leaves — countless banyan tree fruits keep falling
 On the grass's dark green bosom — when village youths come to the forest,
 Looking for soft cane and nata fruits, for dhundyk seeds in the grass—
 Herons can't find them — the countless shalikh and khanjona birds too!
 Thousands and thousands of grass sprout on both banks of this river.

Lying in the heart of the dense vegetation of this rural scene,
 I keep thinking of a time when the Jalshiri hadn't dried up,
 When the sky hadn't shrunk; the bells on Ballol Seri's horse's mane
 Would jingle then through this path; before him other princes too
 Galloped past — what did they quest for, alas, what goaded them on!
 Nothing to quest for new — only nata fruits keep falling to whet all longings!

Translated by Fakrul Alam

fiction

The Rains

by Alauddin Al Azad

Continued from May 13

BUT Zohra remained standing there. Gathering her clothes she looked up at the moon and then at the moving figure in front. Then, suddenly, she grew restless. Stepping like a frightened deer through the stream flowing smoothly over the silvery sand, she stopped again at the brink of the knee-deep water. She gathered the folds of her sari between her legs with her right hand and drew them up to her knees. Bending over the dark water shining in the moonlight, she saw her image breaking into minute particles. She saw that with each tiny wave the image of the moon was breaking up along with hers. Suddenly, she raised her face and called, "Khaled!"

Khaled answered from some distance, "Yes!"

"Are you going away, leaving me behind?" She asked, as if in a dream. "I can't walk. Look, how beautiful the water is!"

Khaled retraced his steps. He said, "What's the matter with you? Please hurry up. It is getting late."

"Yes, you are right. It is getting late," she said. Zohra walked a few steps through the water and then suddenly stopped again. Looking at the shimmering waves, she exclaimed, "Look, how sweet the water is! One could gladly die in such water as this."

Khaled did not say a word. He bent his head and walked on in silence.

A bird chanted somewhere on the other bank. Bau Katha Kao. Crossing the river, she dried her feet and put on her new pair of shoes. But a hollow feeling filed her heart. Like some dry, empty, directionless wind, a sense of utter desolation overwhelmed her. She thought of herself and started violently. Then her whole body went soft and limp.

Khaled was walking slowly. He heard an anxious appeal from behind. "Please stop for a minute!"

"What is it now?"

"I don't know. Why are tears springing to my eyes?" Zohra moved up to Khaled in a daze and, planting herself in front of him, looked deep into his eyes. In the light of the moon, Khaled saw tears swimming in her eyes and flowing down her cheeks like drops of pearl.

Khaled asked again, "What is the matter?"

"You don't know anything. You don't understand anything."

Wiping her eyes with the skirt of her sari, Zohra said in a rush, like one possessed, "Give Saju back to me. There is no one here and I am afraid. Let us go on quickly, please."

A slight wind had started blowing. The two stood briefly facing each other. Then they moved on without a word. A small, dark cloud floated up slowly from the south.

Hajee Kalimullah, walking in his courtyard with his wooden sandals on, looked up at the sky and grew excited. So his guess was right.

"Zaigun", he called out. "Come and see. We were right. The clouds are gathering in the sky."

Zaigun stretched out her neck from the threshold of the door and said, "Yet you want to verify further. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind. Batashi is a veritable slut."

Hajee Kalimullah looked up at the floating clouds in the sky and again started walking up and down. He could not decide what judgement to pass in this case.

Zohra arrived after half an hour. Even while talking with her, lying in his bed, Hajee Kalimullah found his mind wandering. The night advanced and yet no sleep came to his eyes.

Making up his mind the next morning, he went to Batashi's house across the mango grove on the east of the village. Batashi was busy cooking rice gruel in her thatched cottage. She saw Hajee Kalimullah and came out into the courtyard with a wooden stool in her hand. She did not know how to welcome this venerable person who rarely called on people like her.

She tried to say something to Hajee Kalimullah, but the Hajee paid no attention to her. He watched minutely from the corner of his eyes her smooth, tender, light-gold body.

Meanwhile in his house, after supervising the breakfast arrangements, Zohra sat gloomily on the corner of her bed. After her marriage this particular spot drew her with a strange fascination. It was here that she was mostly to be found during her free moments. What was this magic? What mystery was there? Zohra did not know herself. The house had probably

changed in various ways, but this room remained always the same. Only a few new things had been added over the years. The touch of the former wives was still fresh on many objects.

She seemed to hear their soft whispers when she sat alone, quietly in the darkness of this room. It used to strike her that she had no right to enter this room, that, in possessing all the things of this room, she had acted like a thief.

"But how am I to blame? I did not want this. Grandfather said, Don't weep, sister. Have patience for a year or two. The old fellow is about to die and then we will get hold of his property first!"

Zohra murmured to herself, "Property be damned." Her heart burnt inside her, like the scalding sensation one felt when a hot wind blew over a raw sore. She felt as if she was gradually choking. She nearly cried out once. The pupils of her two eyes burned wildly.

Her brain throbbed. Shaking her dishevelled hair, Zohra stepped outside. When she raised her eyes, her look fell on the mehndi plant near the well. The plant flourished in the tender wet earth. Young leaves grew thick on its branches.

She had made up her mind to cut down this plant many times, but had not been able to do so as yet. Today her right hand itched. Quickly entering the kitchen, she came out with a sharp kitchen knife in her hand. She began feverishly to cut off branch after branch with each stroke.

aside his hairy hand, she lay in silence for a few minutes more. Then she rose from the bed quietly and, carefully opening the door, stepped into the courtyard. She stood silently under the mango tree in the corner.

Just as Khaled was stealthily entering the house, Zohra swiftly crossed the courtyard and stood before him. She asked in a low, urgent voice, "Where have you been all day? You like to go without food, do you?"

Khaled did not even try to say a word. He stood there stockstill. Suddenly Zohra raised her right hand and slapped him hard on the cheek and cried out like a demented woman, "I can't bear this pain any more. Please go away from this house. Leave me alone, for God's sake."

Covering her face with her sari, she almost ran to the verandah, entered her room and barred the door.

Khaled stood rooted to the same spot. Tears trickled down his cheeks. He found his throat choking. He had left the house in the morning before any one was up. He had gone to the river bank and wandered aimlessly along the borders of the paddy fields. Then he had crossed over to the ghat, on the other bank, where his two elder brothers worked in a store. Nowhere did he find peace. And at last, drawn by some strange and unknown attraction, he had come back home.

At midnight that Friday, the village elders assembled in the sitting room of Maulana Mohiyuddin. The whole village knew of the affair by this time.

The figure moved away from the window, started moving up, keeping close to the wall, crossed the kitchen and stopped at the door of the bedroom, with each lighting flash, he seemed to shiver in fright. Soon the wind started to blow. The clouds clashed with each other and roared. Everything seemed to break and tremble. The door of the room had not been barred. A sudden gust of wind banged it wide open. The man with quick, frightened steps stepped onto the verandah, looked to this side and that for a second, and rushed into the room in desperation. There was a terrific sound above, below, on all sides. Sound and more sound. With each stormy gust of wind, the corrugated sheets of the roof groaned and twisted. The wooden walls creaked loudly.

Zaigun came running. "What are you doing, ma am? What is this? It is an old tree and has many uses. The master will be very angry when he hears about it." Oh, shut up. I know better than you who will be angry. I want to cut it down and I'll do it."

"I only work here for my food," Zaigun said, "What is it to me? I was speaking for your own good."

"Strange!" Zohra looked up at her. Do you have to worry about my good? Is there no one else in the world?"

Zaigun dared not cross her master's favourite wife any more. With a darkened face she went about her own chores.

Zohra could not say how the morning turned to noon, how evening came and how night fell and covered the face of the earth. Some one seemed to have cut out a part of her heart with a glittering, sharp knife. The tumultuous wave of everyday life evoked no response there. Only a wild fire burned there, like a piece of live coal hidden under ashes.

Hajee Kalimullah came to bed after saying his night prayers, and said, "You know, Batashi has sinned, just as I thought."

"How do you know?" asked Zohra. Hajee Kalimullah replied, "You don't need much intelligence to find out these things. I struck the string in the right place and it rang out. Well, now there is nothing to worry about. Once the punishment is meted out, the rains will certainly come." He added after a short silence, "I'll raise the issue next Friday after midnight, and we'll see what happens."

Zohra lay quietly and looked outside. Why was the smell of the mango buds so intoxicating? Why was the night so black, so dark? It would be good if the sun never rose again. She would then be lost for ever alone in a land, all by herself.

Hajee Kalimullah felt a soft touch on his forehead and soon started to snore. But for that sound, Zohra would have felt that a dead man lay beside her with a white piece of cloth covering him from chest to feet. Pushing

thanks to muted whispers, but not everybody had the right to sit in judgment. Tonight only the elders, the pious, and the alem, learned in religious scriptures, were present in the gathering. They shut the doors and windows of the room, made the accused sit in the centre, and opened the discussion.

Hajee Kalimullah, after carefully going through the religious books and annotations for the last three days and nights, had come to a decision. With the permission of the Maulana he read out his judgement.

Batashi had been moaning softly for some time past. Now she burst into a loud wail. "Oh, mother, was this what was ordained for me? Why didn't you kill me at my birth, oh mother!"

"Stop crying, Hajee Kalimullah shouted. "You thought at that time it was great fun, didn't you?"

Maulana Mohiyuddin looked very thoughtful. His serene face grew melancholy and grave. Slowly raising his face, he asked in a quiet tone, "Well, do you have anything to say?"

"What shall I say, sir? You won't believe a poor woman. We are not human beings, we are cats and dogs in your eyes. How can we have any prestige?" "Batashi wiped her eyes", "Otherwise how could you cast such aspersions on my character?"

But such aspersion do not fall from the sky! Hajee Kalimullah thundered. Why is no one else being accused?"

"My ill fate is to blame for that. Otherwise, why did no one notice before that even while my husband lived I used to be sick frequently, that I could not live without eating tamarind and bits of burnt earth every day?"

Batashi's cousin Rahimuddin sat there wrapped in a dirty quilt and groaned from time to time. When he was questioned, he only stared blankly.

While the trial proceeded, the sky outside was being invaded by swarm after swarm of dark clouds from the south. Every now and then the moon was hidden. Light and shadow played hide and seek with the trees and the houses and the river.

And then suddenly the wind stopped blowing. Nature waited breathlessly for a long time. Deep rumblings of lightning streaked through the sky. Everyone within the room waited anxiously.

Exactly at that hour a human shadow stood under the mango tree behind Hajee Kalimullah's house. It walked on tiptoe, reached the window and looked into the dark room searchingly. Like a haunted building in the midst of an unknown forest, the entire house lay there holding its breath.

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The man came near the bed, then hesitated, as if he did not know what to do next. The hair on his body stood on end, his heart beat wildly. The blood rose to his head and his eyes blurred. Where was he? Was this life or death? Was this the anguish of giving up all or the savage joy of intense union? He pricked up his ears and heard the soft jingling of bangles, the sound of a deep serene breathing and the tender rustling of clothes. Oh no, not here! He did not want this. He could not want this.

He was backing out step by step when he suddenly felt a pair of soft, smooth, naked arms drawing him close.

The clouds in the sky above had, by then, engaged in a mad Scramble. The world shook with the roar of each thunder clap. The sharp, strong stormy wind tore at the trees in a mad fury. Someone seemed to be bent upon an insane orgy of destruction and chaos. Churned out of the depths of heaven, earth and hell, the wild chorus of primeval chaos arose and engulfed everything.

There was only the protest of the newborn when the rains first came, accompanied by sharp stabs of wind. They blew over the fields and houses in windy gusts. But soon this changed. Like the prolonged tune of classical music, the rain fell in heavy showers as the fury of the wind grew less. After that there was only a regular, rhythmic patter.

No one was conscious of the passage of time. After a while the man opened the door of the room, stumbled across the courtyard in the streaming rain and vanished into a room in the northern corner. Zohra followed him out into the verandah and stood there with her dishevelled clothes. The rain fell on her body and drenched her.

After a while Hajee Kalimullah entered the house with an umbrella over his head, he was panting.

Zohra cried out in fear, "Why are you so late? I felt so frightened!"

"What could I do? Well, it is all over now." Placing the umbrella against the wall, Hajee Kalimullah said, "She is a hardened whore. We couldn't get a confession from her even up to the last. But I am no baby that I can't see through the excuses of a woman like Batashi. Both were soundly beaten with shoes and tomorrow they will leave the village for good. And look at the blessings of God! The rains came immediately."

"So they did. Strange, isn't it? With these words Zohra stepped down from the verandah into the courtyard despite the heavy downpour. She was acting strangely.

Hajee Kalimullah protested anxiously, "What are you doing? Have you gone mad? If you get drenched so late at night you'll catch cold!"

"Oh no, I never catch cold." Zohra stepped up the verandah. She pushed back a cluster of damp hair from her eyes with her right hand. Raising her excited face that looked like a blossoming flower, she said with her sweet, laughter-laden lips, "Why, don't you know that it is good to get drenched in the first rains of the year? What a wonderful crop this will give us!"

Translated by Kabir Chowdhury.