

SHORT STORY

Fundamentals

SHAHADUZZAMAN (*translated by Sonia Amin*)

The launch journey to Barisal is quite a treat. One sets off with the setting sun; afterwards, a night afloat on the river. And should there be a full moon, after watching the play of moonlight on the water, a long sleep in the cabin. I had planned to give Arif a surprise visit and spend my vacation with him. I sat down on an easy chair in the cordoned-off area by my cabin. Though this space was secluded, there was a crowd on the deck at the other end. I could hear the racket they were making and couldn't get into the mood for the journey. The rows of dark heads and the coolies bearing their heavy loads on the dock in front of me were not helping either. I needed to think of something else. Turning to the day's paper, I read that somebody had conducted a survey: the world's best-selling book was the Bible, second in line was Lenin's collected works, followed by Agatha Christie's mysteries. Well, I thought, Man is really a peculiar species -- his tastes certainly follow no logical pattern.

At this point, the launch blew its siren, ready to take off. There is a sort of melancholy in the sound of a launch horn. A cool wind began to blow, and I leaned back in the chair for some time. At one point I decided to do a round of the upper and lower decks. The deck was chock-full all kinds of people with their little bags and baggage. There a group had opened a deck of cards, here a few huddled together in sleep, while some idly jabbered away. A lone passenger leaned against the railing with a book, whose title was visible: *In the Midst of a Thousand Damsels*. A number of them sat listlessly. At the far corner someone had hung a sari to shelter a group of women -- a women-only island amid the crowd. It made me remember Syed Waliullah's remarkable picture of life on a launch deck in his novel *Kando Nodi Kando*.

But the crowded deck did not appeal to me for long. I turned my steps back to my cabin. The launch was keeping close to the bank, where paddy fields extended to the horizon. Aah, looked like a good crop this year. Or was it the same every year? How tall does the paddy grow, two...three feet? Rabindranath had written "Sunlight and shade play in the paddy fields today..." I wondered, did he know the height of paddy leaves. Above the strewn paddyfields was the sky, sky upon sky. Wind upon wind. The afternoon sun hung in mid-air like an egg yolk. The grass green, the sky red, an idyllic setting...the Zulus in Africa believed that the sun was an egg laid by a swan in the sky every morning which rolled across that great canopy from end to end. At nightfall a god broke the egg -- the yolk turned into the moon and the fragments of the shell into countless stars.

A woman stepped out from the cabin adjoining mine, behind her a girl. All of a sudden, my mind came out of its haze. Like a doll with a spring neck, my head turned sideways time and again in her direction. She was remarkably good-looking; that is, a beautiful face perched on a fleshy body. Since it seemed unseemly to keep staring at her I devised a rotation system: first my eyes scanned the paddy field, then the sky, the river, then the woman. Again, fields, sky, river, and the woman. Whenever my gaze fell on her, she would fiddle with her *urna*, cover her bosom. As if I wouldn't know what lay beneath. I remembered the lines from Sharat Mukherjee: "A maiden is like a burden of beast/ Poor thing having to bear her breasts night and day". Weren't the lines somewhat degrading for women, I wondered. The poet had continued:

"Yet they do not know they are delight's province
Until the time
The shadow of a sharp-edged man falls upon her
And he gently lifts one up like a vase,
And the other
He plays softly with the tongue of his finger
Or the finger of his tongue."

The sun set, darkness fell. A solitary cow was gazing at the sky on the river bank. Why doesn't that silly cow go back to its shed? The woman and the girl returned to their cabin. I watched the night fall: "The moon comes alone/ The stars come in droves". Accompanied by the ceaseless drone of the engine and the river's sparkle, I watched the night sky. I could see the constellation of Seven Stars,

shaped like a question mark. The stars were so bright; was there really no life out there? Certainly there must be. And had they too gone through the stages of slavery, feudalism and capitalism? Was their Soviet Union breaking up as well?

"Would you like dinner, sir?" The cabin bearer broke into my thoughts. A glance at my watch told me it was surprisingly late. I was annoyed: "Eat your food, and run to the toilet all day tomorrow with saline packet in hand?" I had made up my mind beforehand not to eat anything on the launch and had packed a beef-burger. I now went to my cabin and ate it, but it was not filling. Shutting the cabin door, I prepared to go to sleep. Launch beds are very narrow -- you feel as if you are resting in a coffin. A cool wind wafted in from the river. I took out the Walkman from my bag and plugged in the earphones, then

time. The card gang will fish out a deck of cards; many of them will dive into newspapers and magazines; others will research the causes of the mishap. Women will tend to the cleaning and feeding of babies, girls will dream, while some will calculate their losses irritably. What was I to do? Go down to my cabin and read yesterday's paper. So it was back to the cabin and its narrow bed. There was a very good article on Darwin and the Galapagos island. I looked the pictures of the giant turtles with avid interest.

I came up on deck again. It was noon now. That young woman was leaning against the railing. I looked away carefully... a stranded vessel in mid-water -- wasn't there some famous poem about a motionless ship on a painted sea? Coleridge probably. At this point I spied a group of young boys tuck up their *lungis* and dive into the



artwork by alec

turned off the light and listened to Sachin Dev crooning, "I shall not cry when spring takes leave/ I will light the path of her leavetaking..."

I woke to the strange feeling that the launch was at a standstill. Perhaps we had already arrived. I opened the door and saw that the sun was high in the sky. But what was this? There was no sign of a dock -- the launch was standing still, plumb in the middle of the river. The distant villages looked like picture postcards. What could the matter be? Almost immediately I came to know that we were marooned, that the vessel had struck mid-river shoals. All attempts to get it going throughout the night had failed, and now everybody was resigned to the fact that we would have to wait for the evening high tide to float us free. We were stuck for the day. After completing my toilet I went up on the deck. The banks were quite far off. The shoal was clearly visible under the water. How on earth did we get here -- had that scoundrel captain been dozing? Some passengers said they had even stepped into the shallow water and tried to push the launch last night, but it would not budge. Strange, that I had slept through all that! And where did matters stand now? There was no chance of setting foot on land today. How uncertain things were becoming in this God-forsaken country day by day! My temper began to fray. As I came down the bearer asked: "Would you care for breakfast, sir?" But thoughts of food were far from my mind, so without bothering to reply I stared at the river with furrowed brow: Perhaps we could hail a passing launch and board it. But on querying, the bearer informed me there would be no launch on this route all day. I said to the bearer: "Bring me tea in a clean, well-washed cup." The tea came. No use getting all worked up, I said to myself, Arif doesn't know I'm coming, so no cause for worry.

I went up to the deck -- one cannot sleep during the day. People were walking aimlessly and wondering how to fill the empty hours. Man cannot tolerate emptiness, so he will find some way to pass the

shallow water. They were shouting and frolicking... suddenly I remembered I had shorts in my bag. And ergo - there I was walking in the knee-deep water. It was exhilarating. I swam for quite a while. Afterwards I climbed back, went to the bathroom and towed myself, feeling very refreshed though a bit tired.

After a while I felt a new sensation in my body. My stomach churned briefly. It subsided, then started again. I realised they were hunger pangs: It does not take long for one to understand the language of the intestines. I had not had breakfast, and dinner last night had not been satisfactory either. The pangs were intense. I'd spent hours swimming in the river; water and winds increase one's hunger. That swimming was a stupid thing to have done. What could have induced me... The girl had been standing on the deck. Had I perchance been trying to show off? I could feel my stomach deflating like a balloon. Should I ask the bearer to bring me whatever was at hand? But I had resolved not to eat launch food.

The afternoon was waning. Sunlight glittered on the water. I went down to the cabin and lay down. By now my stomach was sending frequent signals -- unbearable ones. Perhaps I should go up to the deck again. But did I have the energy for that? I felt an apathy -- or was it hunger? I fished out yesterday's paper again. All I could see was "Bombing in Bosnia again." So what concern was that of mine? For that matter the whole damn world could go its own way. I brought out the Walkman and tried to lose myself in Sachin Dev's music. But wait a sec... Sachin's voice hadn't seemed quite so nasal last night. I turned the cassette off. I drifted off into a trance and conjured up objects of passion. Ah, yes, poetry. I opened Rabindranath's *Sancharita*: "Each day blows the gentle zephyr/ Once only blows a storm". No, no, this would not do. Perhaps Sukanta would have been a better choice, but he was not at hand. Meanwhile I could tell my stomach juices had reached a dangerous level.

I stepped out of the cabin and summoned the bearer in a grave voice. "So what have you got for food?" I didn't really know why I asked; had I decided to eat? The bearer replied, "Food for the first class is finished, sir. Now we only have the third class canteen fare." "I see," I replied casually, as if this was of no import. I think I even managed a smile. Up on the deck I spotted a vendor on-board who had been selling snacks. He informed me, "Sir, all the snack packs are gone. Quddus down there had brought eggs and those are sold out too." I dropped down onto my chair -- his words had triggered off another bout of excruciating pains; it was as if some rat were gnawing down there. Looking sideways I saw the woman with her girl in their cabin eating *parathas* and potato fries with obvious pleasure out of a tiffin case. Where did these two get *parathas* and such delicacies here on this launch? Must have brought it with them. How deftly the girl tore the *paratha* and scooped up the fries! I turned my gaze away. But as before, my neck kept swinging in that direction. This time however my eyes did not alight on her loveliness, her lips or breasts. They were fixed on the rapid working of her jaws and the way the *paratha*-fries disappeared into her mouth. I went straight back to the cabin and lay down on the coffin again. But the hydrochloric acid awash inside -- would that start on my stomach walls? The damn acids had begun to flow right after I heard there was no dinner, no snacks, no eggs. What if the launch were stuck here for days, weeks? I could even die, for all I knew.

I stepped down to the lower deck where I saw the third-class cabin passengers queuing up in front of a table filled with baskets of rice. With a casual air I joined the queue. Trying to look like someone who does not possess a stomach is not easy. But why was I ashamed to be hungry? Why should hunger be a matter of shame? But nonetheless, I felt it was quite unsettling to proclaim that a stomach that had been full lifelong could play such mischief on one. There was shoving and jostling in the queue. Suddenly, an elderly man with a beard in front of me whispered "Get in the line, sir, or you will miss it." I felt as if I had been caught red-handed at something. Was my face so eager and desperate? The bearded man took my hand and said "Quick. If you fall back, the rice will be finished before you even reach the table." And amazingly, I found myself in the empty space he had created for me. There was a slight uproar at this, which the man handled by saying "No, no, he is with me. He had just gone to relieve himself." I kept quiet. There was no way out now. The pushing increased. I clutched on to the arm of the lungi-clad man in front. The line inched forward slowly. I held on to the man who was giving off quite a strong odour of sweat. The man in charge of the food kept dipping his dark hand into a basket of bright white rice, ladling it out and splashing some daal over it. An old man whined "Give me some more, son." He was pushed away rudely. A man with a Barisal accent quipped: "If he is so generous with the helping, how will he have any left for us?" Ahead of the man doling out the food, another man stood collecting the price of the meal. A bearer shouted out "This is the last basket of rice." I saw the pile diminishing -- there were quite a few before me. I suddenly felt my throat go dry but did not dare leave the queue. Beads of sweat rolled down my neck. What if I was to be the one who would hear "Well, that's it. It's all gone"?

My breathing grew rapid. Finally it was my turn. My eyes, now riveted to the basket, saw there was still some left. I fished out the money and handed it over like one hypnotized, and held out my plate. The black hand scooped up a fistful of rice, the other man slopped on the lentils. I moved away, sat down at a dirty table, opposite the man with the body odour. He smiled and said "Here, take this chili, one can't eat plain rice and daal." I held out my hand for the chili. Before me was a plate of gleaming white rice, topped with yellow daal garnished with a green chili. At this moment, the siren sounded, and the launch rocked slightly. Perhaps the high tide was beginning. I raise a large handful of the rice and lentil into my mouth. Slowly it began to roll down my gullet.

Shahaduzzaman teaches at BRAC University. The above story is in his book *Koyekhi Biabol Golpo*. Sonia Amin teaches history at Dhaka University.

Letter from MUMBAI

MENKA SHIVDASANI

On October 5, at a Loquacions meeting in the darkened Sunken Garden of the National Centre of Performing Arts in Mumbai, a quiet tribute was paid to Arun Kolatkar (1932-2004), "India's best kept literary secret", in the words of his poet friend Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. It was not a large gathering, just about 25 people, but as each Kolatkar poem was read, the silences that followed underlined the realization that India had lost one of its greatest writers. Kolatkar's loss has come on the heels of the deaths of two other leading Indian-English poets, Nissim Ezekiel and Dom Moraes; for the Indian literary world, this has been a terrible year, made worse by the fact that Mulk Raj Anand has gone as well.

During the coffee break, Kolatkar's friend and fellow poet Adil Jussawalla handed out copies of an article by Mehrotra, published in *Tehelka* this August. Titled 'The Unseen Genius', it speaks of Kolatkar's 'remarkable literary career'. It is remarkable, Mehrotra says, "because Kolatkar, perhaps for the first time in world literature, has created two distinct, independent, and very different bodies of work".

Kolatkar's Marathi admirers, Mehrotra adds, mention him in the same breath as the 17th century Tukaram. Readers more familiar with English knew him as the poet who won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for *Jejuri* in 1977. Mehrotra also tells us that *Jejuri* will appear in 2005 as a New York Review Classic in a series that includes books by Dante, Mandelstam, Henry James and Chekhov.

Shortly before he died, Kolatkar left behind two major works, published by Ashok Shahane's *Pras Prakashan*, *Kala Ghoda Poems* (in Marathi) and *Sarpa Satra* (in Marathi). *Kala Ghoda Poems*, though set in Mumbai's art district, spans the universe. Its longest sequence, 'Breakfast Time at Kala Ghoda', encompasses a restaurant in Seoul, where a dog is slowly being strangled; a Russian spaceship, where the cosmonauts have just finished their breakfast of pork, cheese, honeycake, prunes and coffee; and Leda, the 90-year-old who "dreams it's raining bread", and wonders why "she's the only Jew left, and what happened to everybody".

Sarpa Satra, on the other hand, is an epic-style poem about genocide, in which the sacrificial fire, still not extinguished, is "blackening the air and filling it with the stench of burning." These books were launched together at a function organized in Mumbai this July. Adil Jussawalla was in the audience, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, who had come especially from Allahabad, was on stage; both had worked hard to ensure these books were put together and that people took the time off to be there.

Arun Kolatkar himself sat in the front row, and did not say a word, though he signed a few copies afterwards. When Kolatkar signed my copy--we were renewing our acquaintance after years--he told me he did not have a telephone but that I could always come across to the Military Cafe on a certain day of the week. I did not know then--that he was suffering there sooner--that he was suffering from cancer diagnosed a few months

earlier, and was in the last stages. Adil told me at the Loquacions meeting on October 5 that they were not even sure he would be alive to see the books being launched. There is still a huge body of work waiting to be published, Adil says, so much that it will take a year to put it all together. It is a book that will be worth waiting for, from a writer who has left behind a legacy that has enriched Indian poetry in two languages forever.

For Mumbai's writers, there has been some good news as well. For decades now, writers have recognized the need to get together to find an audience for their work; if you are a short story writer, the chances of being published are almost nil, and if you are a poet, then the situation gets even worse.

A couple of weeks ago, however, a few young writers in Mumbai got together at the Oxford Bookstore to launch *Stories at the Coffee Table*. The initiative comes from the Bombay Writers Cafe (BWC), a group of writers who came together online on a networking site, Ryze, discovered they had a great deal in common and decided to provide a platform to other writers. They have now moved on to put together a collaborative blog, and have evolved into an offline group, with about 200 members in different cities. So far, they've been accessible at www.youngindianwriters.com, but Peter Griffin, one of the members, tells me that Caferati (<http://www.caferati.com>) is now at its own website.

In a city known for its crass commercialism, poetry springs up in the most unexpected places. On October 7, 2004, the makers of Colgate toothpaste, and Sony Entertainment

Table, Volume One. They are asking for original, previously unpublished short fiction in English (up to 3,000 words), to be published in book form. The contest is open to all residents of India, and Indian citizens anywhere in the world, and the last date is October 31. Entries need to be sent via email to caferati@gmail.com. Check out <http://www.caferati.com/SATCT-V1.htm> for more details on the contest.

The BWC has worked out an elaborate judging method, and with each story being read by at least two of the seven editors and selectors, only the very best should get through.

Sunil Nair, author of a collection of poetry, *Vignettes*, and a novel, *Chatroom Blues*, says the BWC's next project will be a poetry venture. If they succeed - and there is no reason why they shouldn't, given their determination to do so - it spells good news for all those young writers in India who have despaired of ever seeing their work in print.

BWC has announced a nation-wide contest, inviting entries for *Stories at the Coffee*

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Television, organized a special event for kids. They had conducted a 'Spread a Smile' song-writing competition for school children, and 33,587 children from Class I to V had sent in their entries. Of these, 630 made it into the hands of the well-known lyricist Javed Akhtar, who culled out 36 of the best. "I have been on many juries," said Javed, "but this was by far the most difficult. That's because these were not poems, but 650 smilie in envelopes."

Javed, who described all the 36 prize-winning poems as "honest" and "real", then drew on the essence of what the children said, and wrote a song that even a cynic like me had to acknowledge was heartwarming. "The big writers, the big poets, who have all the craft and language, and have read all the books worth reading sometimes tend to forget that honesty and genuine feelings are important," Javed said. A hard-boiled journo, who later claimed to be "passionate about poetry", asked Javed a question. "Don't you think poetry is dying?" he said.

"It's not poetry that is dying," Javed responded. "It's the poets." It was an afternoon designed to promote toothpaste smiles, but I never did figure out what the audience found so funny about that one. The problem is, poetry springs up all over the place, but superficiality is never far behind.

Menka Shivedasani is an Indian English poet based in Mumbai. Her two books of poems are *Nirvana at Ten Rupees* (1990), and *Stet* (2003).

There is a Moment

ALVIN PANG

There is a moment when the familiar becomes lost and I am trying to find it.

It should be a gradual process, the loosening of leaves from the fold of bark. Instead

there is a clear point of divide, between what is and what you have known

like a boy who wakes up one morning and clears his throat to find his voice no longer his own.

It could be a similar instant when a chick knows it is time to tear down the walls of its shell

when an old man knows these are the last monsoon rains he will ever see.

We are blind beyond this point, having come ourselves from just such a moment as this.

So much time is spent denying its presence, fending it off with words, holding

back the sea with sand castles as the tide comes in, treating it like a stranger.