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SHORT STORYAFew Pages From An Unknown Diary

MURTOZA BASHIR (Translated by A.Ahsanuzzaman & M Md. Kabir )

20 February, '52  
...People standing on the street seem strangely lifeless. A little while back students on a horse-driven cart had ridden through the streets announcing tomorrow's hartal. No sooner does their last trace vanish than the government van declaring the imposition of Section 144 sweeps by clouding every mind. Even I am overcast. A strange shiver runs through me. Well, is it really moonlight, or are my eye-balls hazy? A desolation.

21 February  
The entire city is dead silent. Some shops are open, some closed. The students gather at the university ground. The street is full of police, trucks. The sun above our heads is scorching. Veins on either side of the forehead throb. Every face blazes in excitement. Jaws are clenching. Questions emitting from every eye and face. Everybody wants to know: *What will happen, what do we do now.*  
The government has declared Section 144. Going ahead with the demonstration now means violating Section 144. *But that will be of no use, with the likelihood of serious disturbances ---*  
On hearing this everybody is angry.  
*Traitors.*  
*We won't turn back.* Amid the jeering and shouts, the voice of the speaker comes to a stop.  
*We've not come here to listen to sweet words. We just want to know what we'll do.*

One from the crowd jumps on to the president's table and says: *Comrades, the government has seized us like an octopus with its Section 144. Comrades, we must violate it. But no processions, no public meetings. Instead we'll proceed towards the assembly hall in tens. There we'll place our demand, the demand of forty-five million people--the demand for our mother tongue.* In the excitement, in the heat of the sun it is as if the blood wants to burst out from every body's eye and face.  
One sentence floats over the heads: *Let's go to the assembly hall.* Meanwhile the process of building long lines for the march has begun. Pushing and pulling to see who gets to stand at the front.  
Standing off to the side, I think, what should I do? Do I join them? But what if something happens? Falgun month is almost here--which is why Mother has sent me a letter: *Come soon.* I keep looking at the street. Trucks crammed with police. The oiled knots of their sticks and bayonets blazing in the sunlight.  
*They'll fire tear gas--* a whisper moves trembling over the procession. Everybody is talking. People ask questions of each other, speak with hands on the shoulders of strangers, unknown comrades. Talking like friends.

One's whole face is sweating. The ear is hot in the heat. Is the sun releasing fire today? Inside everybody's veins, nerves, blood? Pondering over the course of action. What will I do? Today is our art exhibition, where hang my pictures. Today is a day long dreamt-of.  
But I don't know how and when I made up my mind and walked over to the pond to wet my handkerchief as protection against the tear gas. By the time I realize what's happening I am heaving and pushing to get through the police barricade and chanting in unison with the voices around me: *We want Bangla as the state language. We d-e-m-a-n-d Bangla as the state language.*  
The police lathi-charge is like a bolt from the blue. Some at the head of the procession are arrested. People run, scatter in all directions. Then after some time, they look back at the street. At the prisoners in trucks. Their comrades. They can't think of what to do, except simply raise their voices again: *We demand Bangla as state language.*  
They file out of the gate in tens again. Shouting: *We demand Bangla as the state language.* They also are arrested. Again, the procession heads out. Arrested yet again. Pushing to get out. The same question on everyone's lips: how many people they can throw in jail? How much space do they have in their jail? Everybody joins in the scramble to get arrested: all the way from M.A. students to students of class four. Artists, writers, poets--everybody!  
Cracks begin to appear in the foundation under this combined

pressure. So now it is time to launch tear gas shells. Long-range. Not only on the streets but inside the university as well.  
Everybody runs. Children and seniors all. All coughing at the same time. Tears streaming down eyes. Dark night thickens on the eyelids. Suffocation.  
*Water!* The university turns into the field at Karbala. All rush towards the pond. A drop of water is more precious than a piece of bright diamond. I too run.  
We all flee. But there is no respite. An incessant volley of tear-gas. Unarmed students and armed police. They pause, retreat, but do not surrender.  
Crowd broken up. Policemen laugh, holding their rifles loosely in their hands. Lick their lips with tongues. Wipe the sweat off foreheads with their calloused palms. Officers light cigarettes at the corners of their mouths, pressing the cigarette carefully in the left corner of the lip, smoke curling thinly into the air.  
Poisonous fumes come floating through the air. Gas. Enters every house through windows and cracks in doors. Coughing. Students. Professors. All cough harshly. Somebody's handkerchief passed on to another. Given voluntarily. No brows furrowed. People do not care about themselves only. In pain. Yet today every stranger is a friend. Even greater than friends. Comrades.

This is all beyond belief. People look around with occluded eyes at one another. Astonishment. Nobody even dreamed they would be attacked inside the university. People gather in knots here and there. Faces and eyes glittering in excitement. Faces wet with perspiration turn hard as iron. Soft hands used to holding pens now frozen solid.  
The sun is directly above our head. Burning like fire. Heat spreading underneath. Everything getting hot. Field. Street. Water. Man.  
Many become angry. Puffing up like a cobra pinched and poked at. *Let's up beat up the bastards.*  
*Friends, don't lose your tempers. We'll continue our movement peacefully. Won't make trouble.* Many entreat angry young men with palms folded. Their voices gone. Sweat running down faces. Flecks of spittle at the corners of lips, spraying those gathered around them.  
*Peaceful!* One bursts out anger. *Traitors, all are traitors.*  
*Yes, peaceful. Our aim is not to fight with the police. We have to march on the assembly hall. Keep that in mind.*

Again people in tens move towards the entrance. Slogan raised: *We demand Bangla as state language. Won't tolerate police atrocity.* Section 144 is tossed aside. Breaking through the police cordon they move in groups towards the medical college. Clashes there, too. First a police charge on the women's procession, then arrests.  
Anger in every head. Not just the students. Clerks, peons, rickshaw-pullers and plain bystanders too. The students however remain calm, their hands and fists seemingly glued to their sides,



artwork by alake

determined not to cause any trouble. Yet it happens. Forced into it. Police fire tear gas at the medical college hostel. The matchstick thrown on gunpowder. Anger bursts like glowing lava out of a volcano. Spreads from one to another.  
Both sides engage in pitched battle.  
Continuous lathi-charges on the students inside the hostel. Police charging forward like maddened wolves. To break into pieces the most precious future gems of the country with their sticks.  
A desperate resistance. Shirts dripping with sweat. Hands swollen from throwing bricks.  
More tear-gas. Incessant. Death thickening in the air. Poisonous gas. The whole air over the medical college hostel has turned to gas. The sky! A boy with a pitcher full of water stumbles on a tear gas shell.  
All try to run towards the assembly hall. But can't make it. The barrels of the machine-guns of soldiers guarding the assembly hall gleam in the bright light. Some sort of light beamed at them from there, dazzling their eyes.  
Students keep shouting their slogan. The children too. A suffocating sensation in throats. Lungs burning. Yet desperately they press forward. Outburst of intense hatred: *Come out of there,*

MLA's ---  
*Resign from your posts.*  
The police officers say: *Send representatives. Talk with us. We are aware of your demands.*  
Students stop. Look questioning at each other. Thinking it over. Silence for a while. Someone wipes his feet against the bosom of grass. Others smoke. Wipe sweat off the face with their handkerchiefs.  
While we're busy in conversation with each other, we are startled by some sharp, sudden sounds. Some boys lie down, take cover on the road. Confusion all round.  
Bullets come tearing through the air. Shards of flame, the screaming lead searching out the heads, stomachs, the chests of the best, the brightest among us. The students crouching trembling on the grass, on the paved street, on verandas of houses, many of them perhaps the only sons of their parents, others husbands, others perhaps something more, much more.  
Like flood-driven animals everybody runs. Death lunging at them from behind. Lead bullets. It is as if a great restless, indomitable wave, with all the power of the sea, strikes against a steep mountain, but then is smashed by the hard rock into countless drops which then fall back into the waves. We're those scattered drops, and the medical college barrack the waves.  
*Blank fire.* Someone says in a low voice. People to the sides of those injured in the firing. Many others stare, dumbfounded, rooted to the spot, or curse loudly in order to relieve their minds of agony. *What happened?* It is as if they have suddenly been robbed of their wits by

hypnosis, their shoulders touching. More astonishment than fear.  
Many are carrying the injured ones. A scream: *Brothers, we must avenge this murder.* Directs his shouts towards the standing students: *See, this is what we get for wanting Bangla.*  
A whisper from behind: *Don't say that, he'll be nervous.* A fallen figure close to us.  
*No, this is nothing, nothing at all,* we console him. As if we're subsidiary players in the drama, the injured ones the prime characters. We say these things painfully, biting down on our lower lips. How hard feels the lower lip! How very heavy!  
Like water from a tap blood pours out in an unending flow on to the green grass. Here, where just a short while back we had been chatting, lazing around, telling each other tales, tapping cigarette ash to the ground, now no sooner the blood touches the grass that it begins to clot, much like our thoughts.  
*Water.* The voice of the injured student is barely a whisper. We wipe his face with our wet handkerchiefs. He keeps whispering the words--*send a message to my home.* Murmurs--*name Abul Barkat, address Bishnupriyo Bhaban--Paltan Line.* Whether or not anybody is paying attention to his words does not seem to worry him, alarm him.  
*There is nothing to fear,* we console him. Though we feel as if he is a pretext, that in fact, it is we who need the consoling. Our ears are alert, as if we are in class taking notes.  
*We won't give in, no,* he keeps mumbling.  
By now we've reached the emergency. Nurses and medical students busy attending those wounded by lathi-charges and tear gas. As soon as we enter, they startle up as if touched by an electric current. The injured ones open their wan eyes, astonished by what they see in front of them. Tell the nurses, *go take care of them. See to them.* Some of them burst into tears, unable to control their emotions.  
The injured keep coming in. Crowding in on us like ants around food crumbs. One, two, three. How much can we count? How much can the human nervous system withstand?

The polished floor of the ward turns red. As if today were the dolpurima, and everybody has come in after playing with blood-red colours. After a while, looking at the dead body brought on the stretcher, we all feel numb. Forget the language of cursing, of speaking out the mind's agony. Look on as if hypnotized--the skull blown away, the brain out on one side of the stretcher.  
*Oooh, how ghastly,* a schoolboy cries out covering his face with his hands. Blood between his fingers.  
*They were not supposed to target the heads of political activists, were they?* The speaker perhaps does not know whether he is asking a question or answering it.  
*They shot to kill. Killers--dacoits!* The boy whispers rubbing an eye with both hands.  
*Is he your brother?* Somebody caresses his hair, looks at his lips inquisitively.  
*Brother? No, we're together side by side. This handkerchief, he gave it to when we got tear-gassed.*  
All of us look at his hand. As if that small fist is holding some precious stone. The handkerchief in his hand is wet with blood. Blood drips rhythmically on to the floor. Our faces turn hard like steel. We all look at another. Faces glitter like sharp knives in the light given off by bulbs.  
The news spreads like wildfire throughout the whole city. Like a fire fed by the wind, from this street to that street. From this corner to that one.  
People mass in the streets. Forgetting Section 144. As if the sheer force of a fierce storm has made them self-assertive. They ask each other, even a rickshaw-puller says: *Shot to death?*  
*Uh-huh. And now some of the corpses are disappearing.*  
*Seven at the last count. Only Allah knows how many more to go..*

Murtoza Bashir is one of Bangladesh's premier artists. Ahmed Ahsanzzaman teaches English at Khulna University. M. Md. Kabir is a graduate of Khulna University.

February 23rd

FARHAD MAZHAR (translated by Khademul Islam)

After the burial of the martyrs was completed there was nobody left to rescue them from the clutches of the professional feast-revellers. The workmen put the last brick in place at the Shaheed Minar and then made themselves scarce in a hurry.

Nobody knew which person or persons unknown had wept on a bouquet of flowers wrapped in a handkerchief at the site. And so in the afternoon the salt of memory floated up from the secret heart of the wet flowers, as thick as cream. But nobody cast a glance in that direction.

Then at dawn the trails of bare feet. The terrible middle-class sorrow-infested nasal whine of harmoniums rose in the air: 'My brother's blood-soaked...'

A day labourer is angered by this farcical show. A peasant looks viciously at this evil charade. A beggar giggling helplessly breaks out into song:

'Allah Allah say brother o prophet make me whole Life-death fate is in the hands of The Protector. ...'

The song's uproarious laughter reverberates and echoes in the sky and in the air. But then ends in a sort of piteous cry. Tears not for the martyrs, but for the living it is as if someone was sobbing in strangled, low voice.

A terrible smell spreads throughout the city before evening. With time's coffin before him, holy prayers are being said by the executioner garbed in a priestly robe. A resinous depravity manufactured from swine fat is spreading its

wickedness in the air. The syphilitic meat is dropping in chunks from all the corpses which have rotted.

All night long I guard the graves of the martyrs to save them from vultures and jackals.

Comes a time when the professional revelers cease their merriment. At dawn the next morning, daily-wage labourers start their machines, their muscles swelling like healthy engines. I touch them with my hand. Arms that were crafted out of the last breath of the martyrs.

And the seed the peasants daily sow in their fields, those very seeds are chased helter-

skelter and soulfully gathered by them from the graves of the martyrs. A root from one of those seedpods pierces and bursts upward through the paved stone of the Shaheed Minar. A garland in one hand, making complete the future necklace of seeds.

Therefore I was forced to stay awake till the 23rd of February. Because poets do not desert their posts till from deep within the rock issues forth a necklace of trees and plants.

I keep on standing at the Shaheed Minar...

Farhad Mazhar is a well-known poet. Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.



artwork by th lisa

Ekushey

MOHAMMAD RAFIQ (translated by Syed Manzurul Islam)

Great and noble Twentyfirst, the blood-hued Twentyfirst February.

Barefoot processions and streams of people on Dhaka's streets; As if a flashflood has swept all these youths here. Girls with flowing hair and white saris-- the young men in their fine shirts, sleeves rolled up. A black badge pinned to the left shoulder, faces sweating from a ritual fire.

From a flower-bedecked dais the poet shouts his fiery words, the revolutionary rhythm of words, phrases and songs which, like un-reined horses of the sun, tear through the air filling the sky with echoes of drumming hooves a thousand hands raised in hope to make possible the impossible. The sun's galleon drops its oars in the eastern sky.

Barely two miles from Dhaka to the south lies Bailapur; and Jamir: predictably unclad bare feet and empty-stomached-- couldn't even afford a few leftover morsels from last night's meal-- puts yoke on a pair of skeletal oxen. Vacant, nothing to do now. Nothing to do yesterday, or tomorrow. Yet expecting the barren red soil, a gift from forefathers, would at last speak lashed by the angry iron of the plough. And Rahimuddin opens the shutters of his shop and sweeps the dirt out. Last night the mice ate into his store of pulses.

The executioner has no special dress, no family tree, no name, place or postal address. A bloated smile plays on his lips displaying in its ebb and flow a varied conflict of countless waves. Geographic landmarks are etched on the history of the land and time. Birth on the gift of a moment, death of a particular day. The neck waits under a raised blade, as language finds similes under a guillotine, and courage and the integrity of words; and an honest trade in return. But in your effort to dig out a grave and hide Jamir's remains in it, you have forgotten the Twenty-First.

But tell me: has the day forgotten you?

Mohammad Rafiq is one of Bangladesh's leading poets. Syed Manzurul Islam teaches English at Dhaka University.

On Ekushey Book Fair

BELAL CHOWDHURY (translated by Farhad Ahmed)

We met late in the day at the book fair The book looks great; my, how nice, What a fantastic cover--who drew it, Qayyum Chowdhury, or somebody else?

And even though the title sounds offbeat, It still looks to be a superhit. Has this writer brought out a book before? Don't remember seeing one; Though it's possible I am the only one in the dark, About what other literature buffs already know.

I say, where have you been all this time?

Like the tia bird flushed out of a forest Your book too at last has seen the light of the day-- Look how long it has been since we last met And now today on this field at the book fair.

Held it in his hands and turned it over and over Licked a forefinger Leafed through the pages, caressing it with glances...

Quite bold; courageous, I have to admit; Clasped it close to his breast in a tender embrace As if to breathe in its fragrance And drew in a lungful of crisp, fresh air. Then, suddenly, with an abstract, remote air Slammed the book down, and without a word Strode off God knows where

Perplexing me that day, today, and ever...

