

SHORT STORY

PURABI BASU
(Translated by Jyotiprakash Dutta)

I did not come from nowhere, nor was I swept ashore by a tidal wave.
I did cross an ocean by a boat though. I too had a home, a house, rooms with doors, grilled windows. My aging parents were in that house. Dulal was there too. Nobody is there today. Nothing. Yet, that's where I am going back.
The tall, handsome young man sitting next to me has been listening intently to me. I have been talking for some time now. Tamal, too came to this country looking for a better life riding the fortune of a DV lottery. He is going home just for three weeks to get married. That's all he's told me about himself. I know nothing more of him.

It perhaps happens only to the fortunate ones. A lottery win puts you on your way to America! We couldn't even dream of something like that in our time. Going home to get married? That, too, after only two years of coming here? For only three weeks? Are you mad? Where will one find the money? The time? The visa?

The blue passport of the man, whose ice-cold body I am carrying with me in the hold of this plane, is inside my bag now with a similar passport of mine. That little blue book is the thread that connected us. Yet how easily he left that book behind, and is gone now. Didn't he know how precious that blue book was? Maybe he didn't need it any more.

My story, of course, is different. I did not come from nowhere, nor was I swept ashore by a tidal wave. I crossed an ocean by a boat though. I still remember the huge waves! The little boat almost sank before it came up again. My companions were all male. I was sitting in a corner of the cabin numbened. I only knew Hasan and Biroo came from among all the passengers there although they were mostly Bengalis. Hasan and Biroo had been with me from Germany. We flew in the same plane to the Bahamas. How time flies! It's as if it happened just yesterday. Twenty-three years have passed. Just before boarding the plane Parul thrust a small package in my hands saying, "Don't open it now. Look at it later. You might need it. Nobody knows how and where you will be living."

I opened the small brown package inside

the plane lavatory and was stunned. My friend had given me three packs of the Pill, although she knew better than anyone that I was a virgin. I easily recognized the pills and understood what they were for, even though the instructions were written in German. I couldn't thank her when I met her in a Chinese fish and vegetables shop in New York many years later. I just hugged her with all my heart. She smelled of fish all over, maybe because she was working in the raw fish section. Mita was five then, Arnab three. I went to the Chinese store to buy shrimp and catfish for them. Parul still works at the same store but doesn't handle the fish anymore. She is now a cashier.

I still remember that night, just like any other night with a full moon in the sky.
The boat wouldn't go close to the shore, they had already told us. We all had to jump into the water. I understood then why it was essential that we knew swimming. It was almost dawn when we neared our destination. The beach was deserted. If we could somehow walk across the sands in our wet clothes and enter the city, we would be safe. I had a lawyer's name and address in my plastic bag. Not all of us were fortunate. Some of us got caught, some walked away. I spent two nights in a lock-up. I pretended not to understand any of the questions put to me. They even brought an interpreter. I wasn't really afraid. I knew that once I put my foot on American soil, nobody could drive me away. Biroo, too, got caught. Hasan, luckily, escaped. He was the one who got in touch with the lawyer on our behalf, contacted the prison, the courts, arranged finances, and put us in touch with other Bengalis in New York and Germany. I could not thank Hasan enough - I was so grateful to him.

I did not come from nowhere, nor was I swept ashore by a tidal wave. I did cross an ocean in a boat though.

Coming from the land of the mighty rivers Padma, Jamuna, Meghna, I wasn't afraid of water. Yet I wasn't altogether fearless. Days passed, nights fell. We kept riding the high seas towards that unknown destination, living on dry biscuits, roasted nuts, and water. We despaired of ever finding the shore. And the towering waves, one after another. Each time we thought the boat would give in, turn over, but it didn't.

The moon was full except for a tiny dark dent in one corner. Millions of stars twinkled in the night sky. Staring at them, I kept



artwork by amina

wondering if Parul was seeing the same sky in Germany, Dulal in Tarpusha, and Harun Bhai and his wife in New York. Would we ever be able to reach the shore? The silence was broken only by the slapping of waves on the dark water. We didn't understand the sailors' language; they didn't understand ours.

Harun Bhai was not my relative, but my neighbour's really. I had his apartment address in Astoria, and telephone number. I went to his place the night I reached New York. Considering one can't turn back a helpless young Bengali woman and shut the door on her at night, he and his wife let me spend the night at their place. Next morning, they put four subway tokens, a five-dollar bill, and a copy of an irregularly published local Bengali fortnightly newspaper in my open hands and quickly left for work. Looking at the closed door, I understood, through these four subway tokens that they were telling me not to expect any further shelter. I couldn't go back to their place again.

I was a little surprised reading the small

classified ad in that paper, and at first didn't really think I would personally present myself in response to the ad. However, by the time I reached the decision that I would do just that, I had almost reached the address given in the ad, getting directions from passersby. I had already spent one token. The address led me to a large red brick-built apartment building only two blocks away from the subway station. The middle-aged man was in the apartment -- graying hair, unshaven face. He wore baggy white pants and a brown T-shirt.

"What do you want" he asked in Bangla on opening the door. I was a little astonished. How did he know I was a Bengali? "I saw this ad in the paper," I explained.

"Isn't it stated there in the paper that one must telephone before coming?" He was clearly annoyed. "All right, doesn't matter. Come in, come inside."

I entered the room. Even though it was day, the lights were on. The apartment was dark. Suddenly I felt a little apprehensive. I gave a slight shiver.

"Who is the sick person? You?"

"Why, doesn't it show? I had a major heart attack. I have diabetes. My blood pressure is high. There's some problem with valves, too. I can't look after myself alone."

"Do you have a Green Card?"
"Why just a Green Card? I am a citizen. And you?"

"I came to New York just yesterday. I would like to stay in America. That's why I came after seeing your ad."

"Oh, you are the bride then," he laughed noisily, baring his teeth and coughing a little. "Did you look at yourself in the mirror? How could you think an American Bengali who has legal citizenship would marry a woman who looks like you?"

I recoiled. Although he wasn't the first person who had made ugly remarks about my well-cushioned body and round face. I retorted, "What do you think of yourself? An old man, a scarecrow. A diabetic. With high blood pressure. You're nothing but a barrel of diseases. Who do you think would marry you, except a lunatic?"

I darted out of the room. The man tried to stop me, and then started walking to catch up with me. He wasn't angry, rather he was laughing at my outburst. He took me to a coffee shop across the street, rather forcibly. He told me his life-story over coffee and doughnuts. I saw no pretension in him. I still had a hard time calming down. I kept thinking of the things he said. He wasn't a bad man after all, I later realized. The same day he found me a part-time job at a laundromat, folding clothes. A long twenty-three years have passed since, living with him - in happiness and misery, in sickness and health, at rest or work.

Mita is twenty-one now. Arnab nineteen. The relationship that started with the lure of a Green Card didn't stop there. He talked rough but he wasn't a bad man. Harun Bhai and his wife came to our wedding, with two other families. Biroo came too. Even he never thought he would live for twenty-three more years with that diseased, frail body. Yet he lived and gave me not only the gift of a blue passport, but two living beings as well, the two he thought would look after me when he was gone.

In reality, it didn't happen quite that way. Arnab has dropped out of college and almost lives in a Jamaican mosque these days. All he cares about is religion and its rites. His long beard and dress hardly reveal that he was born and raised in America. From his behaviour and the way he carries on, he appears even older than me. Mita is

just the opposite. She is busy with her friends all the time, all of them Americans. Between listening to music, dancing, and partying, she just somehow manages to stay in college. Arnab, my son, now wants to be called Asif. He has finally found his roots, he says. He enjoys looking backward. Not in any other direction. And Mita? Reacting to her brother's behaviour, she is stubbornly trying to be more of a mainstream American woman. She is now living in Brooklyn with a fashion designer. 'Living together,' they call it. A chain-smoker, perhaps does a little drugs as well.

I did not come from nowhere, nor was I swept ashore by a tidal wave. I did cross an ocean by a boat though. I had a home in a faraway land. I had a house with rooms and doors and windows with iron grilles. My aging parents were there in those rooms. My little brother Dulal was there too. And there was something else that we kept hidden from everybody. Not even our nearest neighbours knew about it. We had this houseful of solid, dark hunger and poverty. We had been affluent once, and then poverty tiptoed into the house slowly and silently. Mother, father, homestead - they're all gone now. Dulal fled the country. There is nobody there today. There is nothing there.

Yet, that's where I am going back today, to that faraway land, because my husband always wanted to return home. Only his health didn't allow it. He earnestly hoped some day he would treat himself back to health and go home. If that did not happen, his last wish was that his body be taken back home.

I am returning home with his ice-cold body today.

I did not come from nowhere, nor was I swept ashore by a tidal wave. I did cross an ocean by a boat though. People knew me. I had a home, I had a house with doors and windows with iron grilles. My aging parents were there. Dulal too. There is nobody there today. There is nothing there. Yet that's where I am going back.

*Slightly abridged for publication.
Purabi Basu is a short story writer currently living in New York.
Jyotiprakash Dutta is a well-known short story writer.

Letter from KOLKATA

RUBANA

Thanks to Green activists, the obstinacy of Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya, and the impatience-cum-rashness of the Publishers and Booksellers Guild, the 32nd Kolkata Book Fair drama has had a longer run than expected. I, feeling banished from the Maidan, decided to log on to <http://www.kolkatabookfaironline.com>. The screen had no spirit. It dispassionately relayed its message: "You are visitor no: 573223." Having landed on a virtual land, I hung on to the virtual label, the number tag in the surreal sphere of La Fair! Instead of answers, I came across endless cell/laptop/video offers, tours of food stalls and the frills of the fair.

Restless, disappointed, I needed answers immediately. When would the book fair take place? Where would it happen? The court had passed an order, informed the petitioner's lawyer, Kalyan Bandyopadhyaya, that until requisite permissions were granted by the Calcutta Police, Municipal Corporation and the Pollution Control Board, the guild could not do anything with regard to the book fair.

The fair is one of the biggest in the world in its category. It is held over an area of about 12.5 lakh square feet and hosts about 900 bookstalls. About two-and-a-half million people visit the fair every year where participants sell books worth about Rs. 20 crore. The Kolkata Book Fair is often compared to the Frankfurt Book Fair. This is unfair. The Frankfurt bash is a trade fair where book rights, rather than books, are negotiated. The Kolkata shindig is a retail fair where, under the auspices of the Publishers and Booksellers Guild, bookshops and publishing houses sell their books at substantially subsidized prices. The book fair adorns Kolkata's winter social calendar and it does have the support of the chief minister. However, the High Court on the 30th of January refused permission to the guild to hold the book fair at the designated place by citing environmental considerations as the reason for the refusal.

At a point like this, I am certain that I wasn't the only one looking for directions and answers on the 31st of January 2007.

Before I could resort to the electronic media for further clarification, my next-door neighbor, an avid lover of books, dropped by on a visit and related that he had just come from the symbolic inauguration of the fair at the Maidan. This is what's best about Kolkata. At least one member of every household is a part of some movement. This gentleman also was no exception. He was part of the chaotic streets of Kolkata, yet he was also a citizen of a friendly metropolis that houses innumerable political activists, poets and artists. In spite of its blessings, the city is also overburdened with its share of problems. Environmental degradation now tops the list.

So the Maidan last night, the 31st of January 2007, became a protest ground,



The Kolkata Book Fair then...1979

attended by the likes of film director Mrinal Sen, litterateur Sunil Gangopadhyaya and artist Haimanti Shukla. The mayor of Kolkata, Bikash Bhattacharya, delivered his piece. State minister Subhash Chakravarty played with the balloons instead of making an official statement. Even our very own Taslima Nasreen came, yet decided against a stage appearance. Going Green, after all, has become an essential issue in West Bengal.

Right after the High Court gave its ruling on Friday, 26th January, the book fair organizers met with the chief minister. But to no avail. The minister had meatier things on his platter to attend to, and the Guild members were unable to push home their point.

They had no point in reality, anyway...

Dust pollution resulting in dust allergy and depreciation of exhibited books due to shop-soiling are the major concerns of the Green 'Save Maidan' activists. The grass quickly disappears, the top soil becomes dry and that eventually leads to erosion. Watering controls the dust, but makes the grounds muddy. In order to protect Maharani Victoria's Memorial and her marbles, the fair grounds had shifted to the other end of Park Street a couple of years back. This location had remained a public favorite owing to its location being in the heart of Calcutta, and being very well-served by public transport. It was only the court's special permission that allowed the fair to be held in 2005, which also gave permission for "one last time" in 2006. The Kolkata Book Fair was the only fair to be granted special permission in 2006. Yet, despite these two 'final notices' given to the fair organizers to find alternative venues, nothing happened. The 2007 fair venue issue drew protests from various independent groups like the *Save the Maidan* campaign. The noted Indian publishing and bookselling house Seagull Books, under pressure, announced its intention of withdrawing from the fair.

Starting from the 1990s, the book fair has been themed annually, typically on a country. Last year the theme country was Spain. Dr. Maria Fernanda Santiago Bolanos, one of the most celebrated of contemporary Spanish authors, had chanted 'slokas' from the Rig-Veda and Mahabharata. The last book fair, held on 25th January 2006, had also coincided with the 183rd birth anniversary of Michael



The Maidan now...2007

Madhusudan Dutt. This year it is focusing on Australia. Sadly enough, the Australian team's scheduled to leave Kolkata on the 3rd of February without even having been part of the book fair. Things might change in the next hour or so. Currency of news, after all, is a huge challenge in South Asia.

The fair typically overlaps with Saraswati Puja when most Hindu households worship books on that day and do not touch them for any other purpose. This practice, however, causes lower sales in the book fair. That's the one day when books and divinity enjoy a bond, and even if there's no Goddess of Wealth blessing the wedding, publishing houses like Oxford, Seagull, Rupa, et al, look the other way and count their blessings. Amongst others who add color to the fair every year are the Bengali language book shops: The famous Santiniketan-based used-books seller Subarnarekha, Ananda Publishers, Deb Sahitya Kutir, and Mitra Ghosh Publishers, while amongst the English language book shops, the names of Mentionable. Virtually all major European scientific publishers or their Indian franchises participate, including Oxford and Cambridge University Press, Kluwer and Springer Verlag. The book fair, held on the last Wednesday of January of every year, traditionally boasts of a large presence of litterateurs and commoners who discuss Kafka while sipping tea in a *matir khora*, right by the pavement, blissfully unaware of the digestive problems that we Dhaka-bashis often end up with. Such is the culture in this part of India, a country which has the highest number of readers in the world, and which is a home to the third largest publishing scene in the globe.

Yet the Maidan cannot be used for the fair this year. The reasons have to do with the RPM level.

The term sounds somewhat like a speed indicator and applicable for vehicles and dashboards. But it stands for Respirable Particulate Matter, which is the fine dust that is inhaled and damages the lungs. High levels of it are a major health hazard. For instance, a careful survey of the Maidan book fair RPM level would reveal the following:

People suffer from various ailments due to increased RPM levels in the air. The rise in RPM during Maidan book fairs, therefore, was a serious issue. The West Bengal Pollution Control Board, which had

previously not paid much attention to RPM levels, was asked by the High Court to come up with final findings of the damage done to the environment due to book fairs at the Maidan. In year 2001, a PCB study revealed an almost lethal count of 1136 micrograms per cubic metre at the fair venue. Anything above 100 is a threat to our health. The guild sprinkled water on the ground to bring the level of RPM down. 2002 had a decreased level of 372, January 2004 had 257 micrograms, January 2006 had 288 micrograms. These stats (courtesy of *The Telegraph*) can drive any environmentally conscious, aspiring yogi insane.

Should we read, and suffocate to death? Or should we go Green?

The High Court had the sharpest answer to this. NO, it said in all caps. "This is the victory of environment over politics," said Subhas Dutta, environmental activist, adding that a rally causes huge environmental damage, with poles being dug, makeshift toilets and kitchens being carved out, plastic and garbage being dumped, thousands of feet trampling the greens and loudspeakers blaring.

The Green lobby is strong today in Kolkata. The Calcutta Green Network is working hard to close ranks against rallies on the Maidan.

People disagreeing with the Court's tight slap also held on to their views. Author Samareesh Majumdar spoke against the cricket match at Eden Gardens being held as that too was "hazardous to the society at large." However, he added: "The court only cannot be blamed for the verdict, as the Guild too has been callous so far as its work is concerned."

What now matters is whether the book air would find its way out of the foul weather and finally be organized by the Guild. In a world where Al Gore is a vocal proponent of carbon neutrality, buying a carbon offset each time he travels by aircraft, and has his family driving hybrid vehicles, in a world where a previously anti-environmental American president can find room in his State of the Union address to raise the issue of ethanol, why, indeed should Bengal lag behind?

Last update:

Feb 01, 2007: We have been marginally lucky this time. The organizers have decided to hold the fair at the Salt Lake Stadium, starting from the 10th of Feb and stretching till the 21st. The inauguration will be on the 9th of Feb, the timings will be noon to 8:00 pm on weekdays and noon to 9pm over the weekend and on holidays. The 32nd Book Fair will not bother the players' pitch or the viewing galleries.

Amen!

Rubana is a poet currently doing Phd work at Jadavpur University.

Journal Review

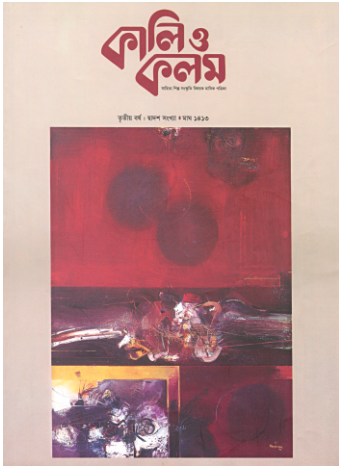
Kali O Kolom January 2007

In the silences of receding winter

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

There is a piece you ought not to miss reading in the January 2007 issue of *Kali O Kolom*. It is the enlightening write-up on Father Marino Rigon. In the manner of many other missionaries who made it their business to travel to these parts, all imbued by the spirit of Christianity, Father Rigon chanced upon Bangladesh, liked what he saw and decided to stay on. But that was certainly not all. He took from Bengal inasmuch as he gave to it. He learnt the language, indeed mastered it, and bravely ventured into translations of Tagore, Saratchandra, Jasimuddin and Lalou. It is on Lalou that Abul Ahsan Chowdhury engages the man of God-cum-man of letters in his write-up. You cannot put it down until you have digested all of it.

That is by no means the end of one's reading. The recently deceased poet, novelist and Communist Party worker Ghulam Qudus has a niche in this issue, a truly deserved one. The commitment Qudus brought to life and politics and of course to the world of literature is appreciably highlighted through the tribute Shaheed Iqbal pays him. And complementing the experience is the remembrance of the late artiste Bikash Bhattacharya. Abul Mansur does a good job of reinforcing our collective hold on the cultural traditions Bengalis have based their thoughts on. Perhaps one of the most focused of articles here is *Chetonaoprabaho Shilpashaily O Chander Omovashya*, where Ahmed Mowla



dwells at length on the stream-of-consciousness technique employed by Syed Waliullah in his works. In the process, Mowla plunges, to readers' delight, into a rather broad account of the genre as it came to define the works of literary figures such as Albert Camus, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. For the student of literature, the article ought to be prized reading.

That the world of literature and aesthetics is one that has expansiveness as its goal comes through lucidly in this issue of *Kali O Kolom*. One point of reference is Rafiq Kaiser's exhaustive *Banglar Mati Banglar Jal*. Bengal's division in 1905 and subsequent reunification in 1911 are an essential component of Bengali history, presaging the final partition of 1947, and one that decisively changed the political structure of the subcontinent. Kaiser's essay is a journey through that dramatic and sorry stage of our history. But rising above the narration is the unspoken sentiment, that the cultural indivisibility of Bengalis is all.

There is more. Rashid Askari's reflections on postmodernism, for instance. Haider Ali Khan's informative write-up on haiku will take hold of your poetic soul. The icing on the cake, if one could call it that, is Sarkar Masud's musings on the recently departed Shamsur Rahman.

This issue of *Kali O Kolom* ought to be gone through in the silences of a receding winter. The enjoyment will be that much deeper, that much soulful.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

Second Daily Star Anthology

The Daily Star literature page, in order to promote English-language writing among Bangladeshis, will publish an anthology of non-fiction writing. Bangladeshi writers/authors/translators, plus our readers, are invited to send in their contributions for consideration. Themes and contents must deal broadly with Bangladesh, or with Bangladeshi life, whether here or abroad. Submissions should be limited to 2500-3000 words, though this condition can be relaxed in the case of outstanding efforts. High-grade translations will also be considered. Translators should send in the original Bangla if they are to be considered. Submissions should be sent electronically as Word attachments to starliterature@thedailystar.net or by snail mail to The Literary Editor, The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka-1215. All submissions must be clearly marked 'For Anthology' (in case of electronic submission on the subject line). Only Bangladeshis need submit. We specially welcome submissions from outside Dhaka, as well as humorous pieces dealing with the lighter side of life. The last date for submission is May 15, 2007.

--The Literary Editor

NOTE

Please DO NOT send poems or short stories. Non-fiction means compelling slices of real life, stories and accounts which may deal with any aspect or event that has actually taken place: the death of a father, for example, a stay at a hospital's emergency ward, travel accounts or a stint aboard a boat. Or giving birth. *Amar Chelebel* by Tagore is a convenient illustration of nonfiction for the Bengali writer/reader. They tend to illuminate ordinary dramas that are rarely seen and felt, or grasped as a whole.