

SHORT STORY

Now Stay

Abeer Hoque

who are we, he asked
lovers, she said
to his wrinkling nose
it's not enough, he replied
not even close

The red glow of the lights inside the Princeton Club made everything seem both high and low class all at once. Of course the patrons were high class, but they were bearable in their indifference to everything but the cheap drinks. That's why he had picked this place for their meeting. He knew she'd be late and he wanted to be able to pay for his drinks while he waited. He lit another cigarette and caught himself coughing in anticipation. Clearing room in his lungs, he thought to himself ruefully and laughed.

"Dada, areka Kingfisher," he asked the reluctant bartender who was probably hoping for a more interesting looking customer. He'd be rewarded when Rox showed up with her flair. There was something about Rox that never failed to look foreign. No matter where she was or what she wore. No matter that she was the one who had been born in Kolkata while he was a transplant from the South. He was sure it would be the same now, though he hadn't seen her in years. It was the only thing he was sure of about her. Everything else was up for grabs.

He had forgotten about her when she came up behind him. He had been lost in thought about his new short, a meditative aural experiment. His idea was that the audience be challenged with sound, to notice its presence, its absence, its power. He had been shooting in South Kolkata for two days now with a crew of two dozen including one precocious brat of a child actor. There was something about using kids in films that felt like cheating to him. The scene only had to start and the boy's earnestness took care of the rest. No, it was more like integrity than earnestness, a hyper accessible and inevitable leap from thought to action. Of course, an audience would accept a child's actions and motives. Wasn't that the definition of a child -- purity of intention? It was one of Arya's goals to elicit that reaction from an audience, but about a seriously unreliable adult character.

"Arya," Rox said in his ear. Her hand cupped the back of his head. He put his glass down on the warped wood bar and turned. She was thinner, more angular than before. His arm slipped around her waist, as her skin offered itself to his hands. Was it always going to be like this? That first split second of drowning in her smell?

"Let me look at you," he said, pushing her away from him. She withdrew in amusement. Did she know what he was thinking? No, he decided. It was just Rox's way to always look as if she did. Besides, he had no desire to rekindle their affair, no matter what

his body thought. It had been torture, their breaking up, though she had never guessed. She had imagined herself the only casualty in that war, as the starry ones often do.

Rox took his hand and pressed it into his chest, curling her wrist in a familiar gesture. Her knuckles against his heart.

"It's good to see you," she said.

Her eyes were brighter than he remembered, her skin and hair darker. She was wearing a knee length cotton kurta and jeans. The kurta was thin enough he could see the silhouette of her torso through it. Her body was leaner, her breasts the same magnificent same.

"You're here for a week, right?" he said suddenly.

"I am," she said.

"Would you be in my new short?" he asked.

"No," she said, just as promptly, "But I want to invite you to dinner. Come."

"Where?" he said letting himself be pulled along. It was like this with Rox. You just got swallowed into her orbit.

"You tell me."

The last time Arya had seen Rox was five years ago. He had returned to India after graduation and she had come on a healthcare assignment. They had both been in between relationships and she had been obviously wanting. He hadn't known why he had (mostly) denied her. It was impossible to completely deny Rox. She exuded something that unabashedly sexual but in a way that was without guile. The physical was for her something separate from emotional. Or perhaps an extension of her often platonic affection.

But he couldn't touch Rox without feeling something that went beyond the physical. Or maybe that was just his loneliness trying to make meaning out of nothing. Shamtoli, his last girlfriend had gotten under his skin. She had made a project out of their relationship and having helped him land a well connected production gig, had promptly moved onto her next mission. But the year he had spent with her in their tiny Jadavpur flat had proved his most adult romantic encounter. He was still angry at his feeling of loss.

"Dokhin is meeting us," Rox informed him.

"He's here too?" he asked with genuine pleasure.

"He's going to Ayon's wedding too, and we're sharing a room at the Tolly," she said, "Didn't I tell you?"

"Really? The Tolly?" he asked. It was his turn to be amused, though he knew Rox had moved far past their days of bread and cheese for every meal. In their university days in America, they would often surprise each other with little additions to their "gora" meals as they called them, more for the pale shade of the food than the race of people.

Bags of potato chips, popcorn, rolls of cookie dough on special occasions.

"It's only for the weekend," she grinned in acknowledgment. Rox was high class, even



stones on the uneven sidewalk. An unusually smooth black stone was the general of one army. In between takes, the boy kept resetting the fallen soldiers because of some conflicted desire for symmetry, or what Arya imagined as fairness, or what Rox would still more abstrusely describe as an expression of love. He kissed Rox again, for once thinking of nothing, not felled armies, not even himself.

The sound of Arya's mobile phone jangling woke him in the morning. He untangled himself from the soft cotton sheets and leapt up to answer it. As he spoke to his production manager in a low hoarse voice, he peered through the paisley brocade curtains. The light burned into his aching vision. He dropped the heavy cloth quickly and turned back to the darkened room.

Was that Dokhin's hand on Rox's hip? His other arm wrapped like a tentacle around her? Arya closed his eyes and let the feeling wash over him. It wasn't just jealousy or possessiveness, feelings which until yesterday had been straitjacketed to his memories of Shamtoli. It was a lightning understanding of something deeper, that he could be with one person for the rest of his life, that he wanted that.

It was true he could have been rebounding from his lost love with Shamtoli, misunderstanding his renewed ability to feel with this overwhelming sense of commitment. But it was also true that he had never felt more free, more desolate than in this moment. He opened his eyes and looked at Rox, stone general, bent on her glistening desires. He admired her love, the kind that never seemed to dim in intensity no matter how far and wide she sent it. His affection was less generous, weakening when shared, zero sum game. Perhaps this was his test. Rox was his unreliable character, but with enough integrity to fill a life. And Arya was the audience. Would he buy in?

The marbled floor of the bathroom was cold and incompletely covered with plush towels. He picked up his crumpled shirt and pulled it on, sliding his feet into his broken down pumas. Rox made a sighing sound and he stopped at the door, his hand on the handle. Walking back to the bed silently, he stood over the bed. Just then, Rox opened her eyes and looked at him. Her gaze was neither curious nor passive. Only aware. It was then that Arya had the sensation that he had always been standing there. That this waking moment would last forever. He reached down and touched her face. Legion, this feeling of touching. This much was true, he thought.

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model give way to for-profit social business, as she was beginning to believe? Was candid photography really a high art form, as Dokhin argued? Would Arya ever stop wearing cargo pants?

Since Dokhin always came prepared, he had a bottle of Black Label, his poison of choice. Many hours and an empty bottle later, they stumbled into a lux room at the Tollygunge. Within moments, Dokhin was sprawled on the king size bed, fully clothed and sound asleep. Arya followed Rox into the bathroom where she was brushing her teeth. He put down the toilet seat lid and sat down on it. She rinsed and turned, leaning against the counter. Her kurta was incompletely tucked into the bottom edge of her bra, an old bathroom habit of hers. Her stomach stretched tantalisingly down into her jeans.

"How are you?" she asked.

"How aren't you?" he countered. This line of Rumi's had been their favourite ironic rejoinder.

"That bad?" she said smiling, "I heard from Ayon you broke up with someone recently."

He realised he had not thought of Shamtoli once that evening. That his anger had somehow dissipated. That all he could think of now was Rox. He pulled her body against him, smelling her skin. Her hands curled around his ears and then linked around his neck. He sat her down on his lap and pressed his mouth against hers. She kept her lips closed. He waited, as their eyelashes tangled, her sharp nose brushing past his cheekbone. She started smiling slowly, the corners of her lips widening against his face, and then finally pursing, gathering, opening.

On the set of his film, the little boy had arranged two armies of different sized

Poetry from the Past in The Where art thou, Feroz? From The F

RUBANA

Feroz Ahmed-ud-din is not a familiar name in poetry circles in Dhaka. He studied English at Dhaka University in the late '60s and early '70s. I met Feroze when I was working in Thai Airways International a decade later. He was then very much the stern executive whose poetic sensibilities did not show. Therefore, when in October 2006 Professor Kaiser Haq handed a copy of his *This Handful of Dust* to me, I was pleasantly taken aback. Feroz has published only one collection of poems, that too way back in 1974, from Professor P. Lal's Writers Workshop in Kolkata. When I looked for it 'The Nook' (Writers Workshop's outlet in Lake Gardens), I found no unsold copies of the book. I ventured into the archive and eventually found the last two copies of Feroz's book. *This Handful of Dust* – ironically, was covered under layers of dust – had a sari-cloth bound cover and was neatly calligraphed by Professor Lal.

Unlike other volumes, there was no introduction to the author. There was, however, a foreword from Professor A.G. Stock, a visiting British professor with a long association with the English department, University of 'Dacca'. A.G. Stock had wonderful words to offer about Feroz. She also mentioned meeting Feroz in 1972 and said that he was an improved poet in 1974. She wrote that "this first book has more than promise", and called his voice a "quiet" one that came from a young country "long submerged in bloodshed".

Feroz's poetry volume has 28 poems, of which only two poems were published earlier and the rest were all freshly written and published by Professor Lal. Surprisingly, for a young mind, silence, darkness and death are the poet's favorite themes. Professor Stock mentions his father's demise, which partially explains his mood throughout his book. The beautiful prose poem that opens the book was also written shortly after his father's death and is the title poem of the volume. The image that this poem conveys is of the handful of earth that Muslims usually strew on the fresh graves of the loved ones:

This handful of dust scattered on the face of time never blots out the sun but deep inside



there is always an eclipse. Feroz also won the All-Pakistan Poetry Prize Contest early in 1971 with 'On My Twenty-Second Birthday' in which he refers to the devil always ready to hand death over to him on a platter. 'Blue Song: Bangla Desh 1971' is a poem that I would like to quote in its entirety:

songs have gone out of fashion in the deep trenches of war here the lullaby here a sudden bullet.

The struggle to overcome the fear of the death and the gradual disintegration of the self complete this poet's world. With lines like: "Grass breaks like ice-cubes of desire", the poet gropes for a tool to battle:

...time's iron enclosers in the dark, clasping frightened strangely beating hearts.

Every poem in the volume has a final statement at the end. All the last two lines or three have a final voice in the poem. For example, in the poem 'Flowers', the poet describes the abundance of flowers but he slowly takes his readers' hands and leads them to the unbarred doors and cautions them against "the darkness inside" which:

will creep towards you engulf you take the form of wolves and devour you.

A 'September Morning', for Feroz, is also not above the "gray ash" that falls

over the city from the previous night when the night's "burnt cinders" are "scattered by the sun". This poem too, ends with a clear statement:

Inside each sunrise frantically the morning gropes for a day.

'The Day Death Was Born' evokes an image of death being visually connected to

...entangled mess of overhead electric wires and crows that dance like memories without sound.

Death, in this poem is being towed and is born anew amidst an "anesthetic, abortive silence". The poem 'Gypsy' has a young man in the poem who is a vent that the poet was looking for. He seems to carry an assurance of life that the poet was desperately trying to cling to.

Knowing that his end is near, Feroz takes a good look at the newcomer and yet is not happy:

At the end of a long journey one has always illusions of a home.

The most tragic poem in the collection is 'Poem Untitled' where Feroz handles a tragic theme with maturity that was extremely unusual and way beyond his youth:

You ask me how we all committed suicide, it was easy...

From then on our corpses have clung to each other for the fear of straying away ...we kept our deaths out of our family albums.

The last poem, 'Cinderella' that I'd like to quote, once again can be categorized as a death poem. Here time seems to be slipping out with smoke filling lungs and cigarette ends writhing on the floor. Feroz ends brilliantly in this poem:

Here when contracts end no final handshakes no grinned goodbyes.

Only moving carriages that turn into pulp and mice running through the night.

While digging into the archives of Writers Workshop, I came across Feroz Ahmed-ud-din four times in different volumes of 'The Miscellany', the bi-monthly publication of the Writers Workshop.

The first time was in the July-August 1976 issue, where he was discussed by

Mary Ann Dasgupta. She compares Feroz's book with Nasima Aziz's *One More* and mentions that both the manuscripts had arrived in the post almost on the same day. Dasgupta mentions Feroz and Aziz as "fresh, authentic voices of poetry" and adds a quick note of gratitude to Prof P. Lal for publishing "untried talent."

He was in Volume No. 64, July-August 1974. Feroz Ahmed-ud-din was published for the second time under the section reading 'A bunch of poems'.

However only 19 were published out of the total of 28. Then I came across Lakshmi Kannan's write-up on Feroz in No. 72, November-December 1975.

Here again Feroz is compared with Nasima Aziz. Lakshmi recollects a Workshop group that had "gathered for a poetry-reading session at the flat of Poppy Ayar, Regional Officer, USEFI". She adds, "It was a day of Nasima Aziz and Feroz Ahmed-ud-din, two Muslim poets who had brought out their first book of poems by WW". Lakshmi mentions Feroz being introduced by Prof Lal and says he had "an ornate Muslim" style. She refers to his poem "Mirrors" and praises its visual reversal of letters having the "collegiate touch to it."

Stand face to ecaf Communicate Hand to dnah Tongue to eugnot sweet to bitter

In the same piece, Lakshmi talks about P.N. Shastri being the first one to point out that as a Muslim poet, Feroz too has followed the tradition of not referring to any gods. He thought that this practice had offered a freshness to the poet's inspiration. Lal however had disagreed. He thought that the absence of gods in poems could be a negative factor as well.

The last time I discovered Feroz was in Volume 88, July-August 1978. That particular issue had Feroz playing with transcriptions of 15 Urdu poems. His attempt to work with poems of Mir Taqi Mir (18th century) is remarkable:

Do not give length and breadth to the nest, O bulbul. For this handful of feathers a handful of twigs will do.

Publishers and poets are a tangled topic

of discussion. Many need to be chased in order to bloom. Publishers throughout the world are largely losing interest in poetry because a few Bob Dylans of the world sound better as poets than vocalists and because melody and beat add more sense to the words a poet utters. In the world that we live in, any thinking mind is a mind of poetry; any philosophy is best comprehended when coupled with the imagination of verse.

Feroz is an outstanding example of this. A poet like Feroz Ahmed-ud-din would have never come my way had it not been because of a chance reference. The fact that he was published in India and not in Bangladesh is a surprise. The fact that he was discussed in India and not in his hometown is a disappointment.

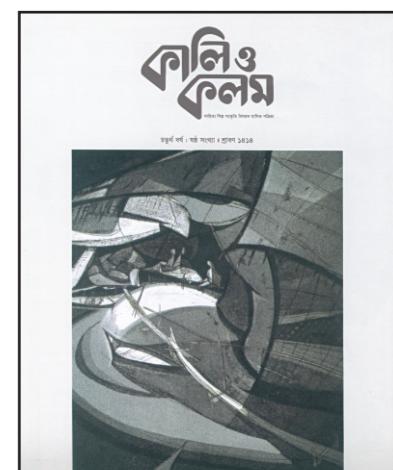
Where art thou now, Feroz? And will you please write more?

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In the morning the washed undergarments smelled of water in the roadside ditches and thin bamboo poles fixed crosswise over the whole of the land of India. A sagging jute cord supported the monsoon sky, binding all fears into a prayer of no more rain.

The indigo applied to the white clothes was going thinner in the drizzle. Coins had changed their faces and markings and worth in the local bazar. Rumblings in the sky and lightning hastened him on the beating-stone in the dhobi-ghat, for ages. Price of indigo was going higher. The milk-goat had died last winter. Kanwalli will have to wait another year for her golden bangles.

For centuries cross-legged the dhobi sits thinking of the rising prices of



Farhad Ahmed

The latest issue of *Kali O Kolom* (July 2007, editor Abul Hasnat; published by IceMedia Limited of Bengal Group) underlines our abiding love affair with Rabindranath Tagore, with the opening article by Professor Anisuzzaman on the poet, titled appropriately enough, 'Takay Jana Furai Na'. It begins with an amusing anecdote that on the poet's 80th birthday Gandhi sent him a congratulatory wire saying "Four score not enough. May you finish five score." To which Tagore replied back, "Four score impertinence, five score intolerable." After recounting which Professor Anisuzzaman launches into his dissertation by commenting that it is really not the length of one's life, but what one does with it. Next is Abedin Kader's discussion of Amartya Sen's continuing preoccupation with identity and the self, framed in the terms of the latter's book *Identity and Violence*. For those so inclined, there are also two well-researched essays – one on Beckett by Amitav Choudhury, and the other on Foucault by Abul Hossain Bhuiyan. For readers of short stories (one reader has written to say that since the short story form occupies a special place in Bengali literature, this section should be expanded in the journal), two are of special mention. One is 'Pagli' by Anowara Syed Haq (with illustrations by Qayyum Chowdhury), and the other is 'Tala Moricher Hoi-Choi' by Zia Hasan – both seem to him with an existential disquiet which reflects the tonalities of modern Bangladeshi life. In the art section Jahid Mostafa's 'Shilpi' Chokhay Muktiuddho' is an informative look at the art inspired by our independence struggle in light of the exhibition held from 7-20 May at the Liberation War Museum