



Nostalgia For The Dodo Bird

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(Translated by Sonia Amin)

Once, a boy came across a snake and started playing with it. At one point he said to the snake: "Look here, the reason I am playing with you so merrily is because my father took out your venom-fangs. I've heard yours is a vicious and ungrateful species."

"What makes you think so?" asked the snake.

"Because my grandpa told me. One winter's day he came across a snake lying under a tree, almost frozen to death. He thought, 'Let me take this poor creature home and warm it by the stove. Perhaps it will revive.' So he picked it up and held it to his breast and set off for home. But on the way, as the snake revived in the warmth of my grandpa's body, it raised its hood and struck. My grandpa almost died!"

"Oh, is that the tale you were handed down? Well, the story does its rounds among our kind as well, but in a different form. What happened was this particular comrade of ours had a beautifully patterned skin, which would fetch a high price in your bazaars. Your grandpa taking our comrade for dead, set out for home where he could take off the skin and then sell it in the market. The snake, reading his thoughts, struck your grandpa to save its skin, literally!"

Though I have started off with a tale about a boy and a snake, my story really has to do with a bird. Still, this is not quite irrelevant, for as they say, it is set down in the Holy Book: "There is food for thought here for those who would reflect."

Mahbub was never particularly interested in birds. However, he was drawn into this matter in a remarkable manner, quite by chance, after he took up his small position at Bonobangla college in a remote town. There was not much company in a small, rural town. However, one day he met Jatin Babu the local post-master. The post was eagerly awaited in small towns; so Mahbub would frequent the post office regularly, where he became friendly with Jatin Babu. As they were walking down a road after work one day, Jatin Babu said, "Look up at that." Mahbub saw a bird flying in circles and then hanging quite still in mid-air. He was filled with wonder. "What bird is this?" he asked.

"This is a *Rakbalbhulani* hawk," Jatin replied.

"Shepherd-enchanted hawk... I've never heard this name before."

"Stop by some time. I will show you many birds you've never seen before."

This was how it all began.

After this, Mahbub would set out with Jatin along winding village roads, whenever he had time. Jatin Babu helped him to recognize many rare birds, and spun many bird tales. Aside from letters, telegrams and money orders, the days and nights of the bachelor post-master were totally taken up with birds and birdlore.

Mahbub, on the other hand, having grown up in a city, knew only the names of a handful of common birds that were mostly found on rooftops or telephone wires: sparrows, mynahs, crows. But having studied literature, he was familiar with literary allusions to birds. Looking at the sky he would evoke Rabindranath's lines 'A flock of herons flies across the sky...', or dream away as he read Jack Prevor writing, 'Went to the bird market and bought many birds, for you my friend.' He had read poems by Keats and Swinburne on the nightingale and pictured the albatross in 'The Ancient Mariner', perched atop the mast of the ship.

Jatin Babu, however took Mahbub deep into the real avian world; he showed him the *barial*, with a yellow muffler round its neck; the *benebou*, and *phulchushi* (the wild bride and honeysucker). Mahbub had heard tales of *Tonatuni* like every Bengali child, but he did not know *Tuntuni* used gossamer spider webs to weave her nest.

So the days passed in discovering new wonders. One day Jatin Babu told him "If you see a heron combing the breast feathers of another heron with its beak, you can be sure they are ready to lay eggs."

Mahbub got caught up in the passion with each passing day, and forgot the loneliness of small-town, rural life. One day, as they were conversing about migratory birds. Jatin told him that the 'Cha' species was the first in the chain of birds which migrated to warm climes in winter. Though all of these fly down from the north right on schedule, there is one erratic species, he said, which comes up from the southern region, from Thailand- the *Shamuk-kebol*.

'Snail-coloured-shell - what a lovely name', Mahbub mused.

Jatin surprised him further: "Do you know that birds from Siberia sleep on their long flight to the south?"

Amazed, Mahbub asked, "Why? Why do they sleep during flight?"

"Why not? They have to fly for 10-12 days at a stretch. But the interesting thing is not all the birds in a particular flock sleep at the same time. Those on the outer rim of the formation stand guard while the ones in the inner circle doze off and get their rest. Then they change places, and so on."

Mahbub felt a growing excitement "But why does a part of the flock have to keep watch?"

"So that nobody gets left behind", replied Jatin. Mahbub's wonder increased. He would cycle five miles down to Jatin's house every day to hear about birds and look for them. On returning home he kept thinking about the wondrous world he had begun to discover. Gradually an idea formed in his mind. He decided to create a small bird museum in his own home. Not live ones - that would be too cumbersome and the creatures might die, but a collection of various species of stuffed birds. He discussed his idea with Jatin, who agreed to help. Jatin had once studied the art of stuffing birds and taxidermy.

So they set about the job, getting things ready.

When their preparations were complete Jatin asked Mahbub "Which bird would you like to start off with?"

"The owl," Mahbub replied immediately. He had decided on this beforehand - the *lakkehi pecha* which Jibananda had termed 'our deep, hoary ancestor', and who, in the poet's immortal lines, hoots sitting atop an *ashwath* branch.

"Has the bag of a moon floated off with the tide?"

"Aha, quick! 'tis time now to hunt a couple of mice."

So the two concentrated all their efforts on trapping an owl. They looked high and low, in bush and bower, in forest and field, for a nest, during daytime and also at night. But they did not even so much as hear an owl hoot, let alone see one. The pair looked inside large tree holes, the *keboksha*, *ashwath*, *jarul*, *shaora* - no tree was spared. They searched inside derelict houses. It was surprising that so many birds flitted in and out of their line of vision, but all owls seemed to have disappeared.

When Mahbub pointed at a nest on a treetop, Jatin dismissed it "See the wild grass in the nest. You can tell by that it is the home of a *munia*." Another day Jatin dug his hand hopefully into a hole in a *pakur* tree, only to be bitten by a woodpecker living there.

How strange, the pair thought! A few days back they had seen quite a few owls in the vicinity, but now that they had set out on their quest the birds had vanished from sight. Undaunted, the obsessed pair clung tenaciously to their quest, though without results.

But one day something remarkable happened. Mahbub was correcting examination scripts late into the night. Suddenly he heard a bird-cry outside in the still night air: *Goo boom, boom, goo boom, boom*. He rushed out and saw in the moonlight, right there in front of his house, a big owl staring straight at him with its binocular eyes. As his heart began to beat