

SHORT STORY

WASI AHMED
(Translated by the author)

The day the dog catchers of the City Corporation finally came and quickly rounded up, killed and carted away the stray dogs, the people in Dolphin Lane heaved a sigh of great relief--despite the sudden action and the cruelty of the catchers' technique.

Those living in Dolphin Lane had been through great misery for a long time, routinely being visited by what they had discovered to be a menace. Every night just as stillness was about to settle in the lane--after the cars had stopped honking and the fog had begun to shroud lampposts--the menace would tear through the silence. No sooner had the weary and sleepy souls of the lane crawled into their beds to press their heads upon single or twin pillows than would begin the night-long torment.

First, one or two forlorn barks. Then a few more, and soon a torrent--dogs howling from every nook and corner of the darkness. Once it started, it would continue on and on--the canine attack making the rounds of the locality with rampaging fury--an organized ritual, so it seemed, as retaliation for the maltreatment they suffered during the day. The kicks, the hurled stones, or what you will.

The canine population in the lane had been growing unnoticed. This indeed was not an issue to keep track of. One bitch bred as many as seven to eight puppies at a time. Some of them died due to lack of food while others were lost under the running wheels on the roads. Still, a good number survived and kept on growing. And the people in the lane, through their regular nocturnal suffering, finally realized that the survival rate was alarmingly high despite the frequent loss of lives.

At the beginning, the people had thought that since dogs were dogs--alert and ever-vigilant--the barking was about something that they sensed. Perhaps thieves or something else which none but they, the dogs, would know. And although no one had trained them, masterless that they were, it could perhaps be an over-alertness of their instincts that made them rip apart the night's silence.

But how could one do without a wink of sleep all night! Not even rest one's tired head on the pillow!

No one had thought of a solution. Because, as the night passed by and daylight broke out, the nightly problem remained forgotten under the toilsome ratrace that ran all day long. But as soon as night returned, dark and chaotic, the howling would come crashing down on them, and all they could do was toss and turn in sleepless beds.

It was when things were at such a worrying state that one morning, the City Corporation's dog-catching squad raided Dolphin Lane, and as if by sheer magic, caught, killed and hurriedly dumped the wandering packs in a truck and raced away. Had the Dolphinites not witnessed the spectacle with their own eyes, it would have been difficult for them to believe that an undertaking of this scale could be accomplished with such ease and precision.

Credit indeed went to the catching squad. They had done their job with great professional skill and discipline. At first they had dispersed themselves in small groups of two or three to lure the dogs into catching range with pieces of bread or biscuits. The men also made inviting sounds with their mouths to further trick them into coming nearer. And as soon as a dog responded by coming close enough, one of the catchers would grab the victim with strong iron tongs, while his partner would thrust a foot-long syringe right through the upper neck, like a drill penetrating into solid earth. It was quick work, delivered with the right timing and precision. What followed within seconds was a muffled scream and faint whining



until the victim choked and dropped still.

The rest of the job was simple enough--dragging the light, middle and heavyweight bodies onto an open truck and driving away.

Those in the lane who had watched the scene from up close--shopkeepers, laundrymen, vendors, passers-by, 'blind beggars'--didn't have enough time to witness every little detail. The dazzling competence of the dogcatchers bewildered them. Later, when they encountered each other in shock and surprise, words got lost in their mouths.

The late November sky hung overhead as timeless and distant as ever.

Despite the havoc caused by the dogs night after night, nobody from Dolphin Lane had initiated the action secretly or from the backstage. The fact remained that the dogcatchers were a specially-trained squad of the City Corporation, and lest they forgot their hard acquired skills, they rehearsed their catching practices in chosen localities a number of times every year. There was a time when their method was quite crude. Instead of poison-filled syringes, they used huge wooden hammers. A single knock at the back of the head was enough to make a dog sleep eternally. In comparison, the present-day device was smart and convenient. Over and above, since it was easy to identify the wandering packs, the catchers could successfully conduct their operation in chosen areas without having to seek help from the local residents.

The truck-ride of the departing dogs marked the day for the Dolphinites with a refreshing change in their daily gossips. The youngsters were more eager and they passed a busy day narrating their reactions to the event.

The reactions of the grown-ups were, however, mixed. Some of

them credited the City Corporation for its timely move, lauding the efficiency of the dogcatchers. They praised the role of the City Mayor, saying that dog catching (with such skill and speed) was indeed crucial to the Mayor's scheme to make urban life peaceful. They went on to hope that in the coming days, similar raids would target stray cats, beggars, footpath-occupying vendors, muggers, toll collectors, drug addicts, bribe-takers, et cetera, et cetera, and that all would be dispensed with, though not necessarily through similar truck rides.

There were others who spoke differently. They expressed their utter disgust and termed the event as an unpardonable eyewash to hide the authority's failure to attend to a hundred important jobs such as traffic jams, flies, mosquitoes, garbage pile-ups, water-logging, robberies, murders, and so on. They made predictions that the ruling party in its next election

campaign would flaunt dog-catching as a grand achievement of its rule and exhibit some desiccated dog tails as glaring proofs of its claim.

Whatever the varying reactions, there could be no denying that the lives of the residents in Dolphin Lane had been made miserable by dogs, and so after the latter's epoch-making exit through the truck-ride, the Dolphinites were fully convinced that the approaching nights would be full of peace, with sleep.

This made the men, women and children joyous. In fact, they were shocked when they realized just how long their eyes had not been visited by sleep--that they hadn't dipped into that mysterious stillness where colourful fishes called dreams danced and swirled with their resplendent fins and tails! How they had passed night after night haunted by bad dreams! They felt distressed to think how the agony of their lives lurked all day long only to hammer on their doors at the dead of night!

At long last, they were going to sleep. They felt exhilarated, and to some of them, it seemed like freedom--a night-long freedom after the tiring captivity of the day.

A few nights passed by. Quiet, peaceful nights. As the silence of the nights thickened, the Dolphinites were amazed at the slightest noise that passed through their ears; even the noise of their own breathing tickled them with a feeling of thrill and of mystery. An altogether new experience, they thought. They couldn't recall if they had ever been through such a wonderful interregnum of silence.

After long chaotic nights, their hearts and minds were immersed in an all-pervading silence. Disorganized thoughts whirled about in their minds evoking long-lost memories. They thought of nature, of the luxuriance of nature offered by silence. They thought of their childhood, and more than anything else, they thought of freedom. They wondered if this newfound freedom could be smeared all over their bodies like sweet aromatic oil!

As the thoughts hovered around, they let themselves dip more into the depths of stillness, and trying to sleep, they were again amazed by the soft pounding of their lonely and yearning hearts. They had missed this wonderful ripple--this beating of their hearts in such harmony and rhythm all these years. They thought more and more about this marvelous gift of silence but didn't know what to do with it. They couldn't sleep.

They discussed their new nightly experiences amongst themselves. They felt good talking about something so different and exceptional, and as they went on narrating their intimate, personal feelings to one another, they discovered that these were neither personal nor exceptional but so unvaryingly common to them all. They could feel through each other's experiences, could see through each other's hearts. However, because of the sleepless nights, their eyes were itchy and swollen, and with their swollen eyes they looked at each other and soon found themselves as though engulfed in the contrasting shadows and sunlight of the dogless, barren Dolphin Lane.

After the successful raid, the City Corporation conducted similar raids in nearby localities with the same deftness and speed. Newspapers carried front-page stories commending the good work. Life in neighboring localities too had been rendered as miserable due to the nightly turbulence, and with the departure of dogs through similar truck rides, people living in those localities heaved a sigh of similar relief as the Dolphinites--despite the sudden action of the dog catchers and the cruelty of their technique. And just as the Dolphinites had experienced, the stillness of the dogless nights stirred up strange emotions in their minds and their eyelids too remained open all night. They too couldn't sleep.

Neither sleep nor freedom seemed to be approaching. They seemed to be creeping in but then cleverly slipped past, and in the wake of the fleeting images emerged, slowly, a restlessness that held onto their bloodshot, sleepless eyes.

They wondered what it was that they didn't have now! What was it that the tranquil nights failed to offer? Their hearts had yearned for this silence for so long!

Was it something they missed but didn't know of? They asked themselves but failed to find an answer.

Was it something that they didn't see or feel but which had lived in their heads, within the closets of their minds or inside their hearts--like the protective charms of amulets! They didn't have it now! Gone!

With their puffed-up eyes they looked shattered. Day after day, they thought and wondered, got weary, weak and at times totally distraught.

Some of them remembered the snouts and the eyes of the departed dogs--males, bitches, puppies in herds, some tailless, some lame and crippled, with festering sores oozing blood and pus. They were of varying shapes, sizes, colours.

They were everywhere. Weren't they? In front of the houses, groceries, butcher shops, in drains, garbage bins, in all the spaces their eyes could travel. Also deep down inside the hearts of the Dolphinites--like some inseparable limbs and appendages.

Did some limbs and appendages of the inhabitants of Dolphin Lane get mixed up with the dogs in the truck when no one was watching? Just about when they had thought of freedom and heaved a sigh of relief?

(Wasi Ahmed is a short story writer and novelist who is presently the trade counselor in the Bangladesh High Commission in Delhi, India. *The Dogs of Dolphin Lane* is from his book *Bijmantra*).

Our autumn moments of protest

AFSAN CHOWDHURY

I.
Do we have to like Taslima Nasrine's work to protest what she faces?

On Jan 16, 2008, Bengali Muslims of West Bengal under the *Dharmamukto Manabadi Mancha* (DMM) (Secular Humanist Forum) demanded that Taslima Nasrin be brought back to the city from which she was rather hastily 'expelled' by the CPI-M led government reeling under the after-effects of massive protests. Its actions against protesting peasants in August became attached to the issue of sanctuary given to the writer.

CPM workers and police had clashed violently with peasants in Singur and Nandigram areas of West Bengal where the government was attempting to take over land for setting up industrial zones from rather unenthusiastic peasants, many of whom were not convinced of the cash-for-land deal. The anti-CPM political groups, both Maoists and Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress Party cadres, helped a resistance that turned the conflict into a bloody confrontation leading to death and ravaging of villages. It gave CPM a bad name it never thought it could ever get in a state it has ruled for over 25 years.

It also happened that the villagers of the areas were mostly Muslims. A land question became an issue of repression against minority Muslims through an inevitable religious-ethnic interpretation and the ancient demons of communalism raised their never-slumbering heads once more. Enter Taslima, caught once again in someone else's war and this time in another people's land.

The anti-CPM agitation became an opportunity for the religious right of the Islamic variety to get organized against the real and imagined angst of being a minority in a 'forbidden land'. The rage against CPM became the outrage of the marginalized Muslims there. If to most political souls, it was a display of CPM's arrogance bred by a long residence in power, to many it was also a display of Muslim anger against authorities there.

With Islam-baiting gone global, the sense of anger was directed against a person who has all over the world become a symbol of having stood against the traditional in Islam, even religion. Taslima suddenly found herself paying the price of CPM's unusual industrialization strategy. Almost threatened by her erstwhile friends, she fled Bengal, a place she had wanted to call home.

Out of Bengal, the Indian government moved her from safe house to safe house, as she tasted being on the run in the land she had least expected to. It was in the Indian IT hub of Hyderabad, also home to many Islamic extremist groups that she was attacked physically in August 2007 and death threats were meted out. It was something she hadn't even experienced in Bangladesh.

II.
These are difficult days for her as she was plunged into difficulties in sequence. Taslima, a doctor, suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure. In late December she suddenly suffered from a reaction to prescription medicines and had to be rushed to AIIMS, India's top medical outfit located in Delhi. She emerged unscathed but complained of a life "worse than being a bird in a gilded cage."

India is certainly not feeling comfortable with her either and in an extraordinary case, the Indian government requested the visiting French Premier Nicholas Sarkozy not to bestow Taslima with the Simone de Bouvier award for 'upholding rights of women' when the former came on a



Taslim Nasrine under attack by the activists of the All India Majlis-e-Itehadul Muslimin (MIM) at the Hyderabad Press club on August 9, 2007.

state visit. Somebody was certainly uneasy, if not afraid, of the ruckus that would have ensued if Taslima was saluted when voices are baying for her blood.

Taslima's visa expires on February 17. No one is sure any more about an extension. NDTV remarks that the request to the French authorities shows how scared Indian secular traditions now are running. The TV station itself was attacked when it suggested the name of M.F Hussain, the painter, for the Bharat Ratna, India's highest award.

III.
The advantage is with intolerance now. In the name of belief, ideology, patriotism and every other dogma, evidence suggests that violence against those dissenting can be carried out. We saw the killing of Bangladeshi intellectuals in 1971 for standing up what they stood for. After 37 years the fact that the killers roam free means killing someone for one's belief is both justified and a safe act of criminality. Today it has become a deadly tradition.

Our present lot of intellectuals should see it coming not just in the extremist's activism but the reluctance of the state to extend protection to dissidents and in the jailing of protesters. If India has fallen to that state where Hussain has to depart India for safety, Taslima may not be far behind.

Shouldn't there have been more voices, words and letters in Bangladesh saying that what is happening to Taslima is wrong and we have the courage and moral conviction to say so, never mind what we think of her writings. This is particularly so in case of the 'pro-1971' group of intellectuals. After all, they have been on the forefront of such issues before, or are they playing it safe knowing that speaking out for Taslima would make them unpopular? Or do we like what is happening to her?

The point is, this is not about Taslima at all or her work, which I personally don't enjoy and have read as backgrounders only when covering her in assignments. This is about intellectual freedom and new frameworks of coercion. Just because there are people who don't hesitate to hit women doesn't mean one should remain silent. It's this fear that has brought us to the point where our governments have had no clue on how to deal with the people who opposed the very state that our leaders represent and rule, inviting the same opponents to Bangladesh to discuss running the state they tried to kill.

The arrow that kills is drawn long before it flies home.

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Kali O Kolom January 2008

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This latest issue of *Kali O Kolom* contains articles on three foreign authors: Simone de Beauvoir, Gabriel Garcia Marquez (aged 90) and his novella written after a silence of ten years (its English translation has been released as *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*), and Normal Mailer, the American novelist who died recently. While the one on de Beauvoir is replete with commonplaces, anything on Marquez is always eminently readable, and the one here is no exception. The piece on Mailer, though informative and informal, yet fails to discuss Mailer's 1968 *Armies of the Night*, which won him both the Pulitzer and the National Book Award and boosted the genre of creative nonfiction to new heights--though part of the problem is, as the writer correctly points out, the unavailability of books in Dhaka. There are two graceful and affectionate in-memoriams: one of Proshanto Kumar Pal (the biographer of Rabindranath who completed 10 volumes of his *Rabijiboni* and yet left his task unfinished, a commentary perhaps on the amount of toil necessary to completely view the Poet's life and work), and Sanjeev Chowdhury, Bangladeshi writer,



editor and musician. Among the essays there is an account of some fascinating research being conducted about women writers of pre-modern East Bengal by writer Shaheen Akhtar, two volumes of which has been published (and which also has been favourably reviewed in this particular issue of *Kali O Kolom*). There is also the usual complement of art/artist and book reviews, poems and short stories--among the latter Nasima Anis's *Daar* (Teeth) and Ashutosh Debnath's *Ghashforing* (Grasshopper) make for enjoyable reading. There is an usual piece on Tokyo's car shows (*Motorgaari's Kabya*) by Mahjurul Haque, demonstrating both a writing style and choice of theme not usually encountered in Bangla. As usual, all pieces and articles are accompanied by the drawings and sketches of some of the best artists of the country, which by themselves make for a separate category of aesthetic experience.

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Two poems by Nuzhat Mannan

Children

No one knows them more or loves them better. As they are mine... from my navel snuggling colony, my walled womb. They are my natives of my blood and tissue, prostrate in my shackled domain. And no surge of resistance or thrust of revolution will ever set my mostly placid brood free from me one day for No one keeps them better or gives them more.

Trousseau

For you, my daughter the flesh colour the burgundy the topaz chiffon the sheer and the pale lace the gold rosettes the emerald sheen and antique pearl drops Venetian glass and Bavarian 'broderie the matte powder the floral whiff a sachet of longing and a plunging price tag.

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