

SHORT STORY

SHAHED ZAHIDI
(Translated from the Bengali by Ahmed Hossain)

"You are an ass and the rest of your life you will remain one," Rocky Mirza said, condescendingly blowing a ring of smoke at him, "We live only once, mate, my philosophy is live like there is no tomorrow, have fun. Think of our old chum Hafiz; our sad and dejected friend kicked the bucket within two years after his intended dumped him. And here I am drinking buckets of pleasure. If it's Samina today, tomorrow it will be Bilkis or Rosina, or Tamanna..."

"Stop it, mate. You're a man of many talents, I agree," Shafiq interrupted.

"Not really, I just want to have some fun. The world centres on pleasure. But what is the point of telling you these things? You and Hafiz are birds of a feather. What has your celibacy given you? You still have time, mate, get married, don't make the mistake Hafiz has made."

Strange thoughts jostled Shafiq's mind: Rocky was right. What hopes Hafiz had of building a life of purity, honesty and sincerity! What dreams his dead friend had! Into his second year at the varsity, he fell in love with Nipa, a classmate, but as soon as they graduated, she left the country for London to get married to a Bangladeshi chartered accountant. Hafiz remained punch-drunk for a year or two; then he joined a college in Dhaka. A year later he suffered a stroke and bid farewell to the world.

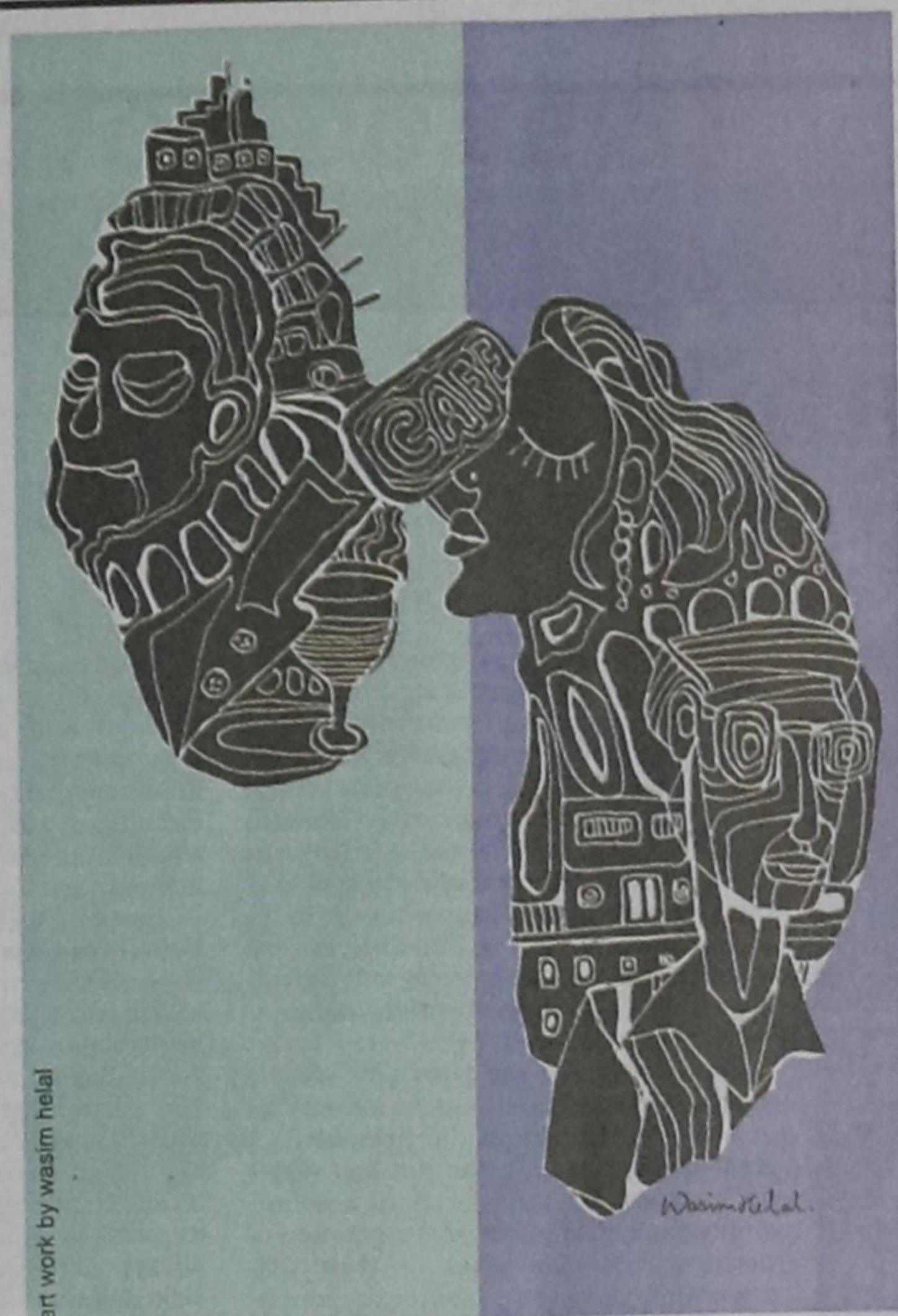
"He was such a nice soul," Shafiq said.

"That's why I am warning you; you have all the symptoms of this nice-soul disease. Get rid of them," he said and poured some whiskey into Shafiq's glass. Shafiq only drank occasionally: boozing, on the other hand, was like breathing and sleeping for Rocky. He recalled stories that he had heard from his friends about Rocky, how he started this business, and within years how he had earned millions. He was a millionaire now with two wives, who lived in two different houses in two different parts of the city. And this bungalow in Gazipur was for him to have pleasure, to have some fun as he put it. Shafiq had not been in touch with him; they had parted their ways as the gulf between their wealth grew wider. Today their paths had suddenly crossed in Motijheel, and as Rocky would not let go of him, he had to get into his car; then quite suddenly Rocky told the driver to go to Gazipur. Shafiq protested, but his friend paid no heed to it. Deep down in his mind Shafiq wanted to have a look at this bungalow of his friend; he had heard stories from the others, stories in which girls as beautiful as hours melted at the touch of his rich friend.

"Hello... Why are you still holding that burned-out cigarette?" Rocky shook Shafiq by the shoulder. Startled, he stubbed out the butt and said, "Excuse me?"

"Listen then. Chuck these nice-soul things out of your system; you will make a real, honest-to-good mess of your life otherwise. It has been seven years since you graduated and what have you achieved since then, tell me?"

Houri



Stray thoughts, thoughts of failure, clogged his mind again: Rocky was right, what had he got from life? Weeks ago he had been made an officer in the bank he worked in, the probationary period being just over, and still he, his retired civil-servant father, his mother and two sisters, lived in a rented house. He needed to marry his sisters off; he would not be able to get married before that, he knew, that was the custom. His younger sister was a paragon of beauty; the family was getting proposals for her hand in marriage. Of late, she had been taken up by modelling; from her behaviour to choice of clothes, Tumpa was different from her brother and sister. Her choice of profession had caused quite a furore in the family. This morning she asked for five thousand takas from Ma, and being turned down by her, she came

to his room, "Brother, can you lend me five thousand bucks?" The word 'lend' reminded him of failure, his own life's failure and along with it came a train of other words: sorrow, shame...

He had been thinking a lot of her, especially after people in their locality started whispering about her that she was keeping bad company--some of it was idle gossip--he would be happy if it were mere gossip--had traveled to his ears. She finished her honours in social welfare and without consulting anyone, all of a sudden, became a ramp model. How much she earned to be able to afford to buy such glitzy, upmarket clothes, and expensive cosmetics he never understood.

"Why have you become silent, mate? The whiskey is of a good brand. Teachers. Will you call its taste bad? But even though Hafiz was a teacher he left the world. Only *shaitans* like me survive in this world, there is no room for goodness in it," he said and started laughing hysterically.

"Why should you be a *shaitan*? The really bad people are those who, like me, have failed to earn money."

"Let's not talk about money. You could have at least got married. If you can't get married why can't you go to a whore, mate? Your conscience does not allow you to do that, right?"

Shafiq half-smiled in reply. He said, "When is your *houri* coming? You said that a surprise was awaiting me."

"She will come on time, mate, don't worry," he said, "There is one thing I must

tell you, I have never shared my hours with anyone, but today I am going to make an exception. You can have her, mate!"

"Really? Is it because you have boozed too much?"

Rocky shouted in reply, "Rocky does what he says he is going to do."

Rocky's phone, as though in a racket competition with its owner, suddenly started to shriek.

"Is everything okay, Hassan?"

"Yes, boss. I have picked her up from Kalabagan."

"Where are you now?"

"Getting nearer, boss."

From the conversation it became evident that a girl was really coming, Shafiq thought. The rumour had it that Rocky had never had a girl for more than once.

"All right, mate! I want to go to heaven with you," Shafiq said.

"That's like my friend," Rocky sprang up from the sofa and hugged his friend whom he had met after such a long time. The doorbell, meanwhile, was frantically ringing. "Go, mate! You are going to receive today's *houri*," he said. With a shivering hand Shafiq opened the door.

"Brother! What are you doing here?"

Tumpa, after spending a few hours in the beauty parlour, was looking like a hour, a real one. The crashing noise made by the glass falling from Shafiq's hand answered his sister's question.

Shahed Zahidi is a Bangladeshi short-story writer. Ahmed Hossain works with the Daily Star. He has edited "Brown Writing: An Anthology of South Asian Fiction," which is awaiting publication in India.

Sri Lanka: the 2008 Galle literary festival

Vikram Seth and Gore Vidal at the festival



RUBANA

To many, Sri Lanka seems not to be part of South Asia. Apart from the 22-year-old war that's scarred the country, and cricket, one hardly reads about the lives in the teardrop-shaped Indian Ocean island. When I visited Lanka this spring, the hotel that I checked into was GFH, short for Galle Face Hotel. The name 'Galle Face' was chosen by the English colonials and attributed to the gate of the Portuguese colonists' Santa Cruz fortress in Colombo. The hotel faced the commercially important port of Galle on the south of Old Ceylon.

A bust of Arthur C Clarke, the legendary best-selling author of science fiction, adorned the hotel entrance. Clarke, who died recently, had finished quite a few of his books in the Chairman's Suite, one of the largest in the hotel. He had also worked there on his latest novel *3001: The Final Odyssey*. Films like 'Fountains of Paradise' based on his book have been also shot in GFH. In a glass case in the hotel's tea room I saw Clarke's tribute to Cyril Gardiner, chairman of the GFH, for the generous use of the suite. Arthur C Clarke, it was evident, was the *eminence grise* of the hotel's literary connections.

I think I know why Clarke liked the hotel. My room was furnished with genuine highly polished antiques and overlooked the ocean. As the sun sank, I admired it from the ocean front terrace. Stone plaques around me read: "GFH admires your decision not to smoke." A notice offered \$10.00 per night if one refrained from smoking. "Please do not smoke in bed because the ashes we find might be yours," said another tongue-in-cheek one.

Later, I met the young executives of the MTV Channel of Sri Lanka who handed a few DVDs to me. The first one, tantalizingly, was of the 2008 Galle Literary Festival, the second and third interviews with writers Carl Muller and Arthur C Clarke. A literary festival here in Sri Lanka? I decided it was imperative that I check them out.

Back in my room, within this monsoon-splashed palace, I took in a festival that had taken place on 6th January of this year. Kumari Balasuriya, Galle's governor, had lit the inaugural lamp along with Gore Vidal, who had travelled here for the fest. Then was glimpsed Lanka's iconic writer Martin Wickramasinghe, reading from a short story called *Lasanda*. Geoffrey Dobbs, founder of the festival, emphasized its aim of "highlighting the great depth and variety of English writing in Sri Lanka." Amongst others, there were Vikram Seth, Alexander McCall Smith, travel writers Tim Severin, William Dalrymple, Brian Keenan, Chris Stewart, Sandra Hoffman, Kamila Shamsie from Pakistan, Tishani Doshi from India, Sri Lanka's well-known Yasmine Goonaratne, Carl Muller, Elmo

Jayawardene, Jean Arasanayagam, along with its diaspora writers Shyam Selvadurai famous for *Funny Boy*, Nury Vittachi, Julian West, poets Indran Amirthanayagam, Karen Roberts, and Channa Wickramasekera.

The two main venues, Hall de Galle and Maritime Museum, had run two parallel sessions simultaneously. Courses ranged from creative writing to even the world of children's program, spanning from art, chess, and poetry to drama. There were book launches of Elmo Jayawardene's *Rainbows in Braille*, Jean Arasanayagam's latest novel *Dragons in the Wilderness*. The next day kicked off with William Dalrymple's readings from his book *The Last Mughal* followed by Michael Meyer and Richard Boyle discussing English in Sri Lanka. Then at the Aditya, a famous literary three-course lunch was organized featuring Vikram Seth and Gore Vidal. This was followed by Tim Severin discussing *Sinbad's Voyages* with Richard Boyle. In one of the more diverse sessions, the role of the publisher was discussed by Sam Perera of Perera Hussain Books, Chiki Sarka of India's Random House, and Alexandra Pringle of Bloomsbury, UK. Apart from this, there was Yasmine Goonaratne's terrific readings from her book *Pleasures of Conquest*, which seemed to stun the audience. Back at the Fort, the sessions continued with Kamilia Shamsie and Tishani Doshi on *Cricket Mania*.

The grand finale belonged to Gore Vidal at the Eddystone Hall at the Lighthouse Hotel. Simon Manchester moderated the session, titled 'The Nature of the American Empire.' Vidal, with all his eight decades of critiques against the American imperium, stole the show by dubbing President Bush as President Dumb Dumb.

With this, the video ended. Since the separate Carl Muller and Clarke interviews ran to two hours, I scoped out a wedding ceremony taking place at the GFH, which seems to be a favourite place for these events. Despite the dozen men grouped together downing a bottle of Johnnie Walker the patio was relatively free.

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Four Ekushey Boimela Little Magazines

SADEEQ AHMED

Aninda: Tk 100.00

This little magazine has been around for a long time--as recollect in an anecdotal, semi-brooding piece on *Aninda*'s 20 years by Tapan Barua titled 'Aninda' beesh bochor, pasha pashi tobou duray duray.' It reveals the gradual fading away of Barua's generation of little magazine activists, as they've launched into other lives, or simply faded away, ending with a forlorn line that "one day in this Bengal there will be a true literature, a little magazine. From Dinajpur to Chittagong." This issue is a mix of short stories, a fairly lengthy in memoriam of little magazine poet Sonchoy Prothom, essays and translations, and some poems. Interesting reads are Tania Bulbul's semi-fictional 'Durjog Bhromon,' a capable translation 'Time within time -- Tarkovsky's Diary,' and Mohammed Khursi's photo essay 'Mon Poboner Nao.'

Drishtobbo: Tk 100.00

This special issue of *Drishtobbo* packs a variety of short stories, poets, translations, essays, and culture and art criticism. Its editorial note with despair the prevailing dominance of middle-class, middle of the road, middling mediocrity of our arts and culture, and those who propagate it, who continue to proliferate like "African magur fish." Perhaps they meant the word 'piranhas' instead. And they offer their alternative to it. The result is a mixed one. Interesting reading are Ziaul Hasan's 'Beena Brittanto,' a translation of an interview of novelist Carlos Fuentes, short stories by Tanvir Tazeb and Aditya Shaheen. There is an experimental read by Lubna Charia involving Tom and Jerry that might puzzle the bourgeoisie. Artwork by Shahinur Rahman seems at times to mock Dhakaites, their rat race. A compelling piece of self criticism can be found in K M Pathik's 'Little Magazine: Nijaykay nijaykay duray duray deyar etki choloman prokriya.'

Nishhorgo: Tk 50.00

This little magazine bills itself as a volume of alternative poetry -- an alternative to presumably the Bengali poetry prevalent

today. As such it features four young poets, Ahmed Munir, Tariq Tuku, Tuhin Das, and Piyash Majid, each of whose complete 'book' of poems has been published. All of Piyash's efforts are prose poems. The poem 'Hemanta Sriti' by Munir begins thus: 'Faces upon faces with faces beneath/While underneath that is mute talk/Within that talk's shadow is sweat/And around that sweat are caterpillars...' A different note is struck in the editorial note where they accuse writer Mizan Rahman of lifting 13 of the 22 articles in the latter's book 'Dui Bangla Little Magazine Bhaban' thereby infringing Nishhorgo's copyrights, and end with the slogan 'May little magazines be free of all kinds of injustices.'

Lekhabil: Tk. 40.00

This issue of *Lekhabil* is dedicated to Bauls, with a piece by well-known folk researcher Simon Zakaria on *Sadhu shongon* rituals in Kushtia that ends with the reflection that a lot of urbanites are now taking an interest in holding such celebratory gatherings. The editorial note states that the works of all those presently working/researching Bauls are present in this volume. Among other remarkable pieces two are worth mentioning: one by Ahmed Deen on Baul Kamaluddin and his songs and the other one by Swapan Nath on Baul poet Giyasuddin Ahmed. The volume also contains an interesting 'manuscript' by Shipa Sultana, interesting not only for its content and style, but also for the fact that it is a woman writer, who are not seen within the confines of little magazines as much as one would like. There is also an interesting critical review section on the nineties poet Mujib Irom, where quite a few critics evaluate him from multiple directions, least not in the direction traversed from those "immediate post-independence poets," in Chandan Saha Rai's words, "with their overlong diatribes, ultra nationalism and international slogan-mongering, depictions of women and love."

Sadeeq Ahmed is a consultant/researcher.



A Day at the Zoo

SHABNAM NADIYA

When they pulled the young man into the back of the truck he banged his head twice -- once against the step, once against the bars of his cage.

He had been jack-hammering the streets with others of the same breed, punctuating the thick summer air with gunshot slogans, sticks and stones, trying to exorcise hawk-heads and jackal-butts. Until tit-for-tatting green-and-blues, khakis and combat gear puppies forwarded him: return to sender, address unknown.

We all wept.

Tear-gassed and blind we sipped our afternoon tea and listened to the early evening news remembering the young man who was disappeared into the dark yawn of a truck

The woman they pulled in by the hair as she screeched and bird-flapped her way to nowhere. Early middle-age, mustard bright sari, mother of two, part time teacher fulltime activist. Her left breast was a secret earth-creature braving the grasp of the left hand that was his: black bandannaed, sunglasses awry, husband of one, father of none, full-time uniform.

Confusion was king as we watchers mourned. A fleeting glance at the angry haloes enflaming the heads of those in their final run to death: nostrum for our desperate hearts.

Fashion Show

BISHWAJIT CHOWDHURY
(Translated by Khademul Islam)

My, what terrific figures you all have! Walking, or floating, you roll and sway Light spilling from perilous curves.

Girl, you know well the artful eyebrow, that lightning parts the clouds--how did you come by this tale?-- And so tonight long before thunder cracks Fires will spark in silence.

From melodies tumble forth waves Waves meaning the laden sea Rich are these waters, sprinting forward is a figure Is it a mermaid, or rising from a sea shell a nude newly-awakened water nymph? Look, see how the shore-lined sand dunes crumble!

That's quite a show of arms, breast-cluster, hips and navel From ankles to rhythmic rows of throats Very nice! But anything else? Say, a mind or heart, feelings, blood, love, rage or grief? Beneath that body is everything all right?

Time is rolling by, when will you unveil those?



Bishwajit Chowdhury is a Bengali poet. Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star