

NON-FICTION

MAHMUD RAHMAN

I'm in my car, driving. The cell phone pressed against my ear, I'm listening to a funny story about Muslim speed dating in Houston. The next minute, my eyes take over. Just ahead, to my right, is the tallest cross I've ever seen, its metal body gleaming in the morning sun. A few dozen people are gathered at the base. Some are praying on their knees.

I return my attention to the highway, Interstate 40 headed east. On the third day of my drive from Los Angeles, I had just entered Texas. The desert landscapes of New Mexico had given way to ranching land, dotted here and there with trees. The exit sign says Groom. Thinking anything's possible, I wonder if the next town will be Bride.

After my trip is over and I have time to look things up, I will discover that the Groom cross is 19 stories tall, the second highest in the western hemisphere. The tallest--by eight feet--can be found in Effingham, Illinois.

I am travelling from Berkeley, California to Cincinnati, Ohio.

While I've been living in Dhaka, I had left my car with a friend. You can't leave a car parked on the road for long. The police will tow it away. She happily kept my car in her off-road parking space, even starting it up on occasion. But she was moving.

The new plan was to park it at a brother's driveway in Ohio. The simplest route would have been to drive east taking Interstate 80. But it was now March and snowstorms still stalked the continent. I chose a southern route. Though somewhat longer, it would allow me to see friends and family in Los Angeles, Oklahoma, and Texas.

It was a familiar road. I drove it just a year ago, in the other direction. Altogether there would be six days of driving, eight to nine hours each day. That I didn't mind--I'm at ease on the open road.

Leaving Groom behind me, I nose into a rest stop. I stretch my legs and guzzle down some water. I call my brother in Oklahoma, letting him know I'll be arriving mid-afternoon.

The rest stop is clean. I'm thankful the states provide for travellers. Two days earlier when I had begun to doze at the wheel, a rest stop emerged at just the right moment. Closing my tired eyes for ten minutes, I was ready to go again.

The interstate highway system in the U.S.



is a marvel of efficiency in moving people and goods. For the most part, the government keeps the roads in good shape, though in heavily travelled segments, bridges and supports are breaking down. The health of this network is threatened by budget priorities that ignore pressing needs at home in favour of a trillion-dollar war abroad.

The roadways are clean. Sometimes you come across prisoners in orange suits clearing debris, but increasingly the state is handing over portions of cleanup to private groups. "Adopt a highway," it's called. Near Concord, California I marvelled that one stretch of I-695 had been adopted by "Atheists and Freethinkers."

Private enterprise takes care of the three vital needs of road travel: Gas, Food, and Lodging. But there is another trinity that seems almost as crucial on America's roads. You could call it Faith, Sin, and the Weird.

There's plenty of displays of Faith. I had just passed a giant cross. I am about to overtake a truck with a rebuke on its back that God should not be called "the man upstairs." When I end my trip in Ohio, I will

go past a giant Jesus with outstretched hands.

Sin however gives Faith tough competition. Yesterday I'd gassed up near a huge casino near Albuquerque. By the late 20th century, gambling had long left its isolated outposts such as Nevada. The Mississippi River is dotted with riverboats hosting casinos. When Native American communities realized they could use their limited autonomy to host casinos, gambling became a coast to coast business.

And where there's lonely travellers, sex for sale is bound to be ubiquitous. It's universal. The largest red-light district in Bangladesh is at Daulatdia Ghat, right next to the ferry crossing on the Padma. In the U.S., billboards with giant letters advertise Adult Superstores, purveyors

of porn and sex toys. Now and then, you come across massage parlours -- the kind promising a happy ending. There's always old-fashioned pickups available at truck stops.

As for the Weird, I'm just about to see an example on my right. As I zip through Amarillo, I drive past a row of old Cadillacs with their noses buried in the ground, the cars on a slant. This one's meant to be Art, but there's other oddities that would be a stretch to consider in the same light. The boredom of a long flat highway between Kansas City and Denver is broken by sign after sign advertising a coming attraction: Prairie Dog Town. See the Live 5-legged cow! See the live rattlesnakes! Pet the baby pigs. In the confusion of all those signs, I hope no one gets mixed up and tries to pet the snakes instead of the pigs.

The Weird must have struck root along roadways when people realized that if they didn't have a natural tourist attraction in their locality, they could create one. I have just driven through states rich with attractions: the Grand Canyon and petrified

forests in Arizona, a meteor crater in New Mexico. For the rest, there's concoction. In Louisiana a gas station entices people with the sign, "See the live tiger!" Perhaps when the tiger dies, they'll stuff it and bury it with its ass in the ground.

I understand Sin and the Weird. In most cases, they're related to that mighty engine called Commerce. Where you have highways carrying millions of people, enterprising

people will always figure out how to con some dollars out of all those wallets. Faith is not immune from that imperative either.

Though I drove alongside the Pacific Ocean on the California coast and climbed snow-capped mountains in Arizona, the longest stretches of my trip have cut through desert.

The first time I visited the desert was in 1994. A friend living in Los Cruces in southern New Mexico invited me to visit. When she picked me up, she took me to a spot in the shadow of the Organ Mountains. We trudged through dirt, sand, and sagebrush to a patch of land. She hoped to build an adobe house there.

"So what do you think?" she asked.

We were in the glare of a burning hot afternoon, in terrain entirely new to me. I replied honestly. "I feel intimidated. Here in the shadow of those mountains and standing here like a speck in the middle of the vast desert, under that even vaster sky, I feel totally insignificant. I know that in the larger order of the cosmos I do not have any significance, but do I want the land around me to remind me of that? I'm missing greenery, and the sounds of nature. Near the ocean I also feel overwhelmed, but the ocean at least speaks to me. Here geography seems to be sitting in silent judgment of me and my life."

I've been to other deserts since, and I've opened my eyes and perked up my ears. It's no longer as intimidating. And I have changed my mind: it is not a bad idea for the universe to cut through our pride and remind us humans that we are dust in the cosmos.

It is in the open spaces of desert and mountain where I now most enjoy my road trips. Perhaps it is an antidote to the rest of my life. In crowded cities where I prefer to live, there's endless stimulation, but the thickness can sometimes be too much so. There's a part of me that periodically likes emptying my mind out. Just me on the road. With other people passing by, them in their own cages, me in mine. Around me, beyond the asphalt and gravel, just rock, sand, and scraggly vegetation. At the most, in the

distance, trains passing by. And these days, a cell phone tower or two.

The colours too are different. The earth brown, reddish in places, shades of grey deepening into black. If there's life, it sports straw turning into a dull green, washed in dust. Too early in the spring I only catch small patches of yellow and purple wildflowers. Meanwhile there's the sky above, an expansive blue laced with a few wisps of white cloud.

"Don't you get bored," friends ask, "when you drive across these empty landscapes?"

I don't. If I crave another voice, I can reach for the cell phone. Most places I can connect. Then there's always the radio.

No matter where you are, you're bound to get two kinds of stations. Country music. And Christian broadcasters.

I check out Christian radio.

On one station, the voice, at first calm and composed, shifting over into heat, comments on the crisis in New York. The Governor had just resigned after it came out that he had been visiting a \$1000-an-hour escort. When the Lieutenant-Governor took his place, he immediately confessed that he had extramarital affairs during a difficult time in his marriage. Where have we come to, the voice on the radio asks, when a public leader admits to infidelity and stays on in office? If he had any morality, he would resign. If the people had any morality, they would demand he resign.

When this leg of the road trip is complete, I settle in at my brother's living room in Norman, Oklahoma. As images from Bangladesh appear on NTV, I muse about parallels and universality.

Go out on the roadways of Bangladesh and what do you see? Catchwords adorn the backs, sides, and fronts of CNGs, trucks and buses, sometimes cars too, proclaiming Allah as all powerful. There are Koranic injunctions, orders to pray. In today's Bangladesh there seem to be more public displays of Faith than when we were the eastern wing of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Religion is more of a badge, sometimes verging on challenge.

I wonder about the impoverished sense of aesthetics among believers today. The Groom cross in Texas is described by one website as "an awesome sight." But it seems that its principal quality is not beauty but sheer size. There was a time when devotion did guide artists to create works of magnificence. Michelangelo. Raphael. Sometimes size can be part of beauty, but size alone?

If size is what they're after in Texas, numbers are what we go for in Bangladesh. Can we scrawl signs on more vehicles? At one time Muslim devotees concerned themselves with the beauty of their calligraphy or grandeur of their architecture. I see little of that around Dhaka.

Beauty and taste aside, can we say we are more moral as a result of all these displays of religiosity? The owners who put religious slogans on their vehicles, do they show more respect for passengers, staff, or pedestrians? If they did, would we have as many horrendous road accidents? And in the U.S., despite the profusion of words invoking God, from the White House on down, can you say there's much evidence of morality when Iraq's been savaged to pieces and urban ghettos are bogged down in despair?

With clamorous displays of religiosity devoid of taste or a sense of justice, it's not morality, not even devotion, but something else at work. On the surface it's pride. But could that simply mask deep-seated insecurity? Perhaps it is the fragility of existence in Bangladesh, or the uncertainties of an imperial power in decline in the U.S., that lead people to symbols.

There have been times when I have driven with companions. On this trip, I drive solo. But that's not strictly true. Crouched in my passenger seat is Celia. Sometimes she sits perched on the dashboard, but braking usually drops her back into the seat.

Before I set off on my move to California from Rhode Island eleven years ago, my workmates gifted me money for gas, a cooler with some snacks, rain proofing for my windshield. They also felt I needed a travelling companion. They handed me a stuffed chimpanzee.

Last year when a friend in California saw the chimpanzee again, she referred to her as 'he.' I corrected her, reminding her that many years earlier she had helped nickname her Celia. She said, "Oh, let me make sure no one's going to make that mistake again." Taking off her dangling earrings, she stashed them to Celia's ears.

Someone could say, isn't Celia too part of what you call the Weird on the road? There's no denying it. Travelling brings forth the offbeat. Though Celia is no talisman, she personifies love and friendship and their enduring place in my life.

(Mahmud Rahman's first book, a collection of short stories titled *Killing the Water*, is forthcoming from Penguin India)

Diaspora Dialogues

SAYEEDA JAIGIRDAR

On June 11, 2008 the City of Toronto is launching a literary anthology titled 'TOK 3: Writing the New Toronto' at the Luminato-Toronto's Festival of Arts and Creativity. Among the writers being published is an emerging Toronto writer of Bangladeshi origin and to my surprise it is I! How did I turn into a diaspora writer and what does Toronto as a city do to the Bangladeshi literary soul?

When I landed in Toronto, ten years ago, I had come from the desert land of Kuwait, where I had taught English at a college for six years. Imagine being lifted from the sand dunes of Arabia to the green parkland that is Toronto. The verdant lushness of the drive from the airport to a cousin's place--it seemed like the leafy coolness of home. The word 'Toronto' is a Native American word meaning 'meeting place' and as I explored the city in the days, weeks and months to come, it lived up to its meaning. Here, indeed was the cultural mosaic the Canadian government has been trying to promote--there were people around me of every colour, shape, size. As I sat on a bus looking around the city seemed to be bursting at the seams with variety and colour!

I joined a Toronto community college and was soon enmeshed in the life of an English teacher. As I taught, I also began to read voraciously the multicultural writing that Toronto had to offer. The first (Canadian) South Asian writer whose story I encountered in one of my courses was Himani Bannerji's 'The Other Family.' Himani Bannerji was born in Bangladesh and is a professor at York University. My South Asian students loved the story about a little Bengali girl. Two of my colleagues published a book of short stories titled 'Stories about Us,' which included Tagore's 'The Kabuliwallah.' As I read parts of the story aloud to my Canadian students, Tagore's simple, poetic prose would melt the snow outside my classroom windows and I could see my homeland in much the way Tagore looked into the Kabuliwallah's eyes and saw the mountains of Kabuliwallah. And so in this way, quite unknowingly, while teaching the elements of fiction to my students, I began to write my own stories.

Where did my first stories come from? They came from the human tales around me, what my students told me about bits and parts of their lives, confiding in a desi teacher. My colleagues in Toronto encouraged me, as my colleagues had done at the

Puritanical nationalism and woeful anatomical complaints

ISOBEL SHIRLAW

Set on Campbell Road -- an apparently ordinary residential street in Bangalore, Brinda Charry in *Naked in the Wind* (Penguin India, 2007) introduces us, one by one, to its far from ordinary inhabitants, all brought together by a single, significant, event -- the return of Venugopalan Vasu accompanied by his quietly ominous side-kick, Anand.

The narrative voice shifts as the story unfolds along the street, observed and recounted, almost cinematically, through the various eyes of its residents. From Vasu's quietly beautiful wife, Shanthi, who has been mourning his absence for the past fifteen years, to her seductive maid, Rani, all the way along the railway track to the mad beggar woman who sits with her sari around her hips, and the trapeze artists, dwarves and eunuchs who populate the parallel world of the nearby circus. The individual stories demonstrate the difference of human identity; they are punctuated with Hindi, English, Tamil and Kannada but as the plot develops we are awoken to sense of a shared sense of community -- a "common childhood."

Charry is caught in the conflict between difference and unity. Vasu and Anand have become intoxicated by the promises of Hindu nationalism -- a dangerous dream that she shows to be illusory, picking apart individuals' attempts to deny their inherent position in a community. "They shrug off home and the tireless bonds of duty and love, and went looking for something that they all called by different names. Did the peace they found in their travels and the shattered lives they left behind balance each other out, cancel each other in some larger, indefinable scheme of things?"

Charry writes with elegance and the multiplicity of the narrative shows off her skilfully stylish ability to conjure character through internal monologue. But there is a violence in the undertones -- a violence that has been brewing since the beginning, with portentous newspaper reports of nuns raped in convents and missionaries burnt alive. It is a violence that represents the dangerous ramifications of puritanical nationalism, culminating only in the final scenes. We are left, at the end of the novel, with a call to the heavens as one of the protagonists, Marie, appeals to a "God of thresholds," beseeching Him to "let [her] see in more than one direction, [to] let us all stay multiple."

In *Perineum, Nether parts of the Empire* (Penguin India, 2007), Ambarish Satwik has created a delightfully irreverent fictionalised history of colonial India. Told from the perspective of British governors, viceroys and kings, Satwik takes us on a blistering journey from the beginning of the Raj through to independence. India herself is presented as a perineum -- "the narrow region between the proximal parts of the thighs" and each chapter contains a woeful anatomical complaint nestling neatly between the legs of the subcontinent. From Colonel Robert Clive's circumcision to King George V's swollen pus-filled scrotum, we see the undressing of Empire, the reduction of grandeur, pomp and ceremony

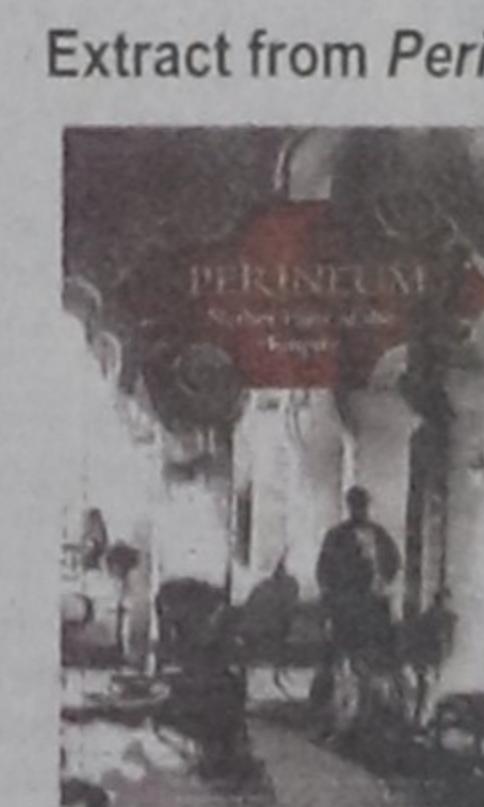
to its bare bodily and ugly reality.

A surgeon by profession, Satwik nails his subject to the treatment bed with rivets of historical fact and revels in the gross anatomical dissection of stories, as if they were body parts, smothered in diseased blood, faeces and mucus. Nothing is sacred; no haemorrhoid is left unturned. The result is a curious mixture of medical textbook, historical source and pornographic fantasy. There are moments of grotesque humour, sadness but the overriding sensation is of squirming disgust as we see how the destinies of millions was determined by mere men--flesh and blood, slave to their own human senses.

The account of the removal of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi in 1912 is interwoven with the twisted testicles of King George V, who is haunted by the phantom of a poor child he saw seven years before. The ceremony, durbar and rousing music is reduced, on the day, to a "testicular denouement."

The Constitution, rooted in an honourable belief in the "alienable right of the Indian people to have freedom" takes on a different flavour when the draft sits adjacent to an idly jotted erotic ditty inspired by a young beauty glimpsed by the author in Lahore, with the foul taste of onions on his tongue, and his daughter asleep in the room next door.

Too often, the dense anatomical description hinders the pace of the stories themselves, which has an oddly dislocating effect on the reader. But structurally, the novel is fascinating, and the narrative reflects one of Satwik's own characters' storytelling -- "an exalted form of rumour-mongering [that] involved the abstraction of fiction from its ore; real people, real places, a bit of folklore and the manufacture of quotidian legends"; he makes "vectors out of the listeners, carriers of the tales."

Extract from *Perineum*

Diary entries of Honoria Lawrence, married to Henry Lawrence--seconded to the Revenue Service--on 21 August 1837, whereupon they embarked "on a pinnace that took them up the Ganges to Revanjal, whence they went by land to Gorakhpur."

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The pudendum, in this heat, gives an execrable smell. It is the smell of the river with its fish, of rotten almonds and of a crimson dye called Heena. Sometimes my Indian rubber shoes, when I am sweaty, smell similarly. The fetus has been admitted to my world of smilures and oils of sandal can't rid me of it. I wonder, for our sakes, if I can ever belong to these plains. There is something strangely obscene about our lives here.

The river is wider at Monghyr and there are other boats with us now. A tall, white-headed grass called Moonge is seen on the banks. The forts of Monghyr have been mouldering away. We are on the deck and Henry is busy writing. The pomographer, I feel, is the second self. His reason for being is to afford a certain kind of pleasure. But it is the alter idem, and others like him who can recognise it and partake of it. There is the hubris of religion in it and that sort of thing is more than I can divine. But I do give myself to it. I am Henry's little sacrificial animal....

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On The Blink

KAISER HAQ

My wall clock has stopped
With hour hand at 8
And minute hand at 36
Or 37, depending
On where you're looking from:
Parallax or something
I once learnt in high school science.
The second hand jerks
Between 40 and 41,
Like a discharging dick.

The batteries need changing
But I don't change them.
My wristwatch isn't on my wrist
But I don't open the drawer
To look at it
Or take it out and strap it on.
I've no idea what time it is
And I don't give a damn.

I don't turn on the radio or TV --
Keeps reminding you of the time.
The newspaper, slid under the door,
Takes a catnap -- I glance at it
But don't pick it up
Or try to read the big headlines --
Feels good not to bother.
My head's light as a feather,
Without a care in the world --<br