

SHORT STORY

ABEER HOQUE

a drop of sweat is born above her eyebrow it slowly gathers weight attains adulthood until the moment it is perfectly formed then motion heaviness breaks apart its surface its liquid interior coming forth, the drop slides inexorably downwards and disappears

Juthi and Dina were sitting in Juthi's dining room, surrounded by the remains of their lunch. The summer heat was as liquid as presence as rain, though it hadn't rained yet. Today, Juthi's grey cotton kameez was dark with sweat, but she was determined not to switch on the air conditioner. It wilted her. A momer putul, a little wax doll, said her grandfather.

"The last thing I want," Juthi was saying, "is a love marriage."

Dina snorted, "No one does arranged marriages anymore. Not unless there's a mullah or hijabi in your immediate family. And that's not your family." She eyed Juthi's father's liquor cabinet meaningfully.

"Speaking of which, I am a little thirsty..."

Juthi shook her head. She knew what havoc love had wrecked so far. For her parents. For her parents' friends, Shagor Uncle and Modhu Aunty. For Juthi's own friends, Sal and Madhobi. Even Tahsin's maid had fallen for love, and Juthi saw her crying every time she went over to Tahsin's. It was like a virus, these love marriages, multiplying everywhere she looked.

"It's not as if there's much difference in the weddings any more," Juthi retorted. "Arranged marriages aren't all crying brides and mirrored looks. Or maybe all marriages are sad now. Remember Madhobi's posh love do?"

"Oh, he was gross! I don't know what Madhobi saw in him."

"Don't be horrible. She loved him," Juthi said. They were both laughing now.

All these examples made Juthi afraid. Afraid for all the rose-banded couples, unable to see the love-propelled disaster descending. Afraid for her own chances at marital joy. She wasn't going to get married just to get divorced. She knew how hard it was, even when you loved someone to pieces. She was going to be prepared.

"Ok, fine," Dina said, "I know divorcees

suck, but at least it means you're not stuck in some shit marriage for the rest of your life, like before."

"Granted," Juthi replied. "But I'm not talking about that. In the old days, you had to fight tooth and nail to get into a love marriage. So you'd to choose carefully, and God forbid you picked poorly, because after all that trouble, who'd want to walk away? Who could?"

"So what's your point? People aren't choosing carefully now?"

"Yes! Because it's so much easier now to have love. People pick carelessly and then compounding the problem, they try less."

"Ok, fine, so you let someone else choose your husband for you, but who chooses? Your parents?"

Juthi laughed. She would make it happen. Through quips or quiescence. One way or another. After all, Juthi still knelt for the Magrib prayer. It was the only one she did now though she used to do all five when she was younger. When her mother left. When her father faded.

Dina had lost interest in the conversation and was tugging futilely at the drooping spikes of her hair. In an effort to regain her attention, Juthi picked up the sports page and intoned heavily, "It was not easy for the skipper to - ACCEPT - the fact that he was no longer... captain." She whispered the last word.

Dina started to shake in silent laughter. It was their favourite form of entertainment. Juthi's naturally hoarse voice at once mimicry, seduction, and melodrama. And the daily sports page was perfect for their purposes.

"What shocked me most was the way I was treated!" Juthi switched to a high-pitched socialite's whine, pressing her hands against her heart. She pranced up the dining room, her dopatta trailing behind her, her long hair swaying with her undulating motion. When she turned, Dina was watching her eagerly with her heavily kohl-shadowed eyes.

"I pitch before you, skipper mine." Her hands cupped Dina's narrow shoulders. "My wicket heart has no chance against you. Give us a kiss."

Dina obliged. She leaned down and pressed her damp lips against Juthi's. Juthi was the first to break away, pounding heart, ribboned breath.

"I love your antics," Dina said easily. "Hey, let's have a splash of Amir Uncle's Bailey's and go to Tahsin's?"

"Sure," Juthi said even though she didn't really want to do either. Tahsin was home from Georgetown for the summer and ever since Juthi had introduced Dina to his

Wax Doll



artwork by amina

crowd, she'd been spending time with them. Drinking, smoking, hooking up. The only reason Juthi went was because of Dina.

At Tahsin's mansion of a house, Dina kicked off her sandals into a pile of shoes in the foyer and ran up the gleaming granite stairs. Juthi prised hers off more slowly, and looked up to see the old maid watching her silently.

"How are you, Komola?" she asked, remembering her name at the last second.

The last time she had seen Komola, the woman had been inconsolable. Juthi had not understood much of her garbled story of a man with strange eyes and a first wife. And Juthi had guessed this last: finding love, and then losing it. Juthi thought perhaps it was never there to begin with. Not real love anyway, the one that made you stay, no matter what.

Komola shrugged tiredly, "I'm here, as I've always been."

Juthi was lost in thought as she ascended the stairs. She stopped outside Tahsin's room, raucous voices filtering out through the half open door. She could see Dina lounging on the bed intertwined with four of their friends. More bodies were spread out on the floor. There was a boy she didn't recognise leaning against the wall, next to Shoma and Gorjon. Older than the rest of them, in a rain-stained kurta. She remembered her own clothes drenched against her body and pulled at her kameez uncomfortably. When she looked up again, she saw him watching her. Before she could react with a wink and smile, something passed between them. It had nothing to do with words, nothing even with feeling, but a

certain kind of understanding.

She took a breath and pushed open the door. A pop tarantella was playing. Snapping her fingers in time, she glided into the room in a spurious version of the tango, her arms akimbo.

"Are you ready for it?" Juthi said huskily in Tahsin's direction and then silently berated herself for encouraging him. He inhaled from a joint, nodding, his chiseled face engaged.

She clapped her hands down on her thighs and proceeded to smack different parts of her body.

"Is it the macarena?" Zubair called out laughing as Juthi kicked one leg out

and then another at odd hooked angles. Dina jumped up, grabbed Shoma's arm, and they fumblingly followed Juthi's lead.

"No, it's the makrosha!" Juthi spiked her clawed hands in the air spider-like. Water drops flung from her swinging hair. Her backup dancers collapsed laughing. Juthi couldn't look in the boy's direction for fear she'd fly apart. She didn't know why. So she looked at Tahsin.

"Juthi," he said holding out his hand, "How do you come up with the shit you do? It's hysterical."

She took his hand reluctantly and sat on the edge of the bed. Dina had started up a dance party. The tarantella had transitioned into an electronically remixed Baul song.

The sun was burning its way through the rain clouds, though the hermetically air-conditioned house didn't give a hint of the heat. When Juthi dared look up, Dina was gyrating to the music, and had pulled most of the others into her orbit, including the stranger. He was older than Juthi had first thought. Maybe in his 30s or even older. His eyelids were dark and his frame too thin. But she liked the lines around his eyes. His clinging kurta. His pricking presence. Shoma flashed her million-watt smile at him, and Juthi felt a clawing in her chest.

When she turned back, Juthi realised Tahsin had moved so his body was curved around hers. She resisted her implicit flinch.

"He's an artist," Tahsin said into her ear.

"Who?" she said carelessly. "Gorjon's cousin. Has the best yabba hookups." Tahsin took another drag. "Crazy too."

and I came away with a few, among which were:

The State of Martial Rule by Ayesha Jalal. The author is a Pakistani Cambridge- and Harvard-trained scholar who first came to prominence by displaying a refreshing lack of restraint in critiquing Jinnah. She has written a string of highly regarded books on the political economy of Pakistan's defence establishment. This particular book was published in 1990, and foreshadows the themes that she was so eloquently later to extend. Of particular value is Chapter 6, 'State and Society in the balance: Islam as ideology and culture' where she probes the dialectic between state and society in terms of using Islamist ideological and cultural symbols.

Ayesha can deploy a withering sentence: "Exposed to Arabic while speaking a regional language or dialect at home and learning English and Urdu in schools, and in Baluchistan also Persian, most of the first-generation of upper and middle class Pakistanis grew up being literate not in one language but practically illiterate in at least four."

A four-and-half-star (\*\*\*\*1/2) buy.

Memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy. I have never been a Suhrawardy fan, mainly because of his cheerleading of Pakistan's membership in Cold War bully John Foster Dulles's erection of a cordon sanitaire around Red China by means of the SEATO and CENTO pacts. It gave the Pakistan Army its first, later grown insatiable, taste for American money and material, thereby precipitating its emergence as an authoritarian and undemocratic force in the domestic political arena. But the force and charisma of the man is undeniable--Suhrawardy was personally courageous, with a tremendous drive, and had the interests of Indian Muslims at heart. Anti-communism and its corollary came naturally to a man who built his political machine in Calcutta by forming anti-communist labour unions--as he says here, "I paraded a blue flag in opposition to Red."

"These," notes Dr Kamal Hossain in the book's Foreword, "are unfinished memoirs... a first draft of what would have been a much larger work" had Suhrawardy lived. It is, of course, self-serving, but no less the fascinating for it.

A three-and-a-half star (\*\*\*1/2) star buy.

Vintage Short Fiction from Bangladesh, translated and edited by Sagar Chaudhury. I'm always interested in translations of our local fiction/literature, and so I picked it up. However, the translation quality is so-so, interesting in an archival sort of way.

A two star (\*\*star) buy.



Taxes, the caretaker government and UPL book sale

KHADEMUL ISLAM

One of the areas that the caretaker government has not turned its reformist glance at is the exorbitant taxes imposed on imported books by Bangladesh, as well as the indiscriminate way various governmental agencies apply it. It results in untold miseries for booksellers in terms of customs clearance and confusion about categories of books liable for taxation (textbooks on Shakespeare, for example, may be taxed by one not-too-bright customs officer while let go under a loophole by another). It also has resulted in an ever-diminishing supply of quality books into Bangladesh and a consequent pauperization of its intellectual and literate bases, never too strong to begin with. Good foreign books are in short supply. They have become hideously expensive, a situation that causes outrage when one reflects on the fact that Bangladesh has the highest tax rate on imported books in the whole of South Asia. How can the Nepalese and Sri Lankese (both in far more roiling national turmoil than us) pay less for the same book? And why? Additional outrage is fueled by the knowledge that such taxes were originally imposed by unscrupulous elements in the domestic book publishing industry by lobbying past governments in order to have a captive market for their products. While their protectionist efforts were directed at books from West Bengal ('if you can't match them, ban them' is the motto here), the indiscriminate application of such a duty meant that nearly all categories of imported books came under the ax. No amount of appeals to previous authorities, indifferent to issues of books and literacy, held hostage hand and foot by publishing lobbies, managed to have it even reviewed, let alone rescinded.

The immediate past government had as its coalition partner the Jamaat, which managed to get 'religious' books (i.e. books on Islam) off the hook, flooding its madrassahs with its required reading. Shouldn't the same relief be provided to Tolstoy and Shakespeare, among others? Isn't it time that books were freed from such manacles? Has anybody ever heard of better books being written, or superior authors being produced, by erecting protectionist barriers around the written word? In fact, what happens is the very opposite, since freed from the necessity of pursuing excellence, getting a free lunch off a captive market, the quality of books produced domestically deteriorate and intellectual standards fall. Readers get habituated on the narcotic of substandard, one-dimensional literature, and good, established booksellers are driven to desperation and out of business.

It is time we citizen-readers were freed from such shackles!

In such times it is therefore refreshing to come upon discounted book sales, and none is more welcome than the annual sale of inventory by UPL. This year, it was held at the Public Library at Shabbagh, and even though it was a hot day the temptation to check it out was irresistible. Books were laid out on tables a bit too close to each other, so diligent browsing was hampered by the bustle of bodies. One disappointment was that the London Oxford publications were on display but not available at discount rates. So, though I lusted after Badruddin Omar's 2-volume set on the Language Movement, I decided not to buy it on the principle that a discount sale is a discount sale and one should not be made to fork out regular prices at such events! No doubt the import duty is responsible for such a policy. Still, the discount rates on the other books were excellent,

Of History and Memory



Saima Hussain, Niaz Zaman, Intizar Hussain, Asif Farrukhi and Asad M Khan

The first, 'Habib Mamou', was a translation of Chekov's 'Uncle Vanya', which I saw long, long in a famous British production and remembering thinking, at that time, of Chekov's great relevance to the sub-continent. 'Habib Mamou' brought this out with great clarity. There were some really good performances, particularly by Talat Hussain and Rahat Kazmi, but the play, which revolves around a landed family unable to cope with changing time or declining fortunes, was set in pre-Partition UP. Many in the Karachi audience thought it should have been set in modern Pakistan. Well...that is a possibility, but it would have overlooked the historical context to Chekov's play; he portrays landed gentry shortly before the Russian Revolution, of which they have no inkling -- a situation more akin to that of UP zamindars who were wiped out by Partition, unlike the zamindars of Pakistan.

The second production was 'Sufaid Khoon' by Agha Hashr, an Urdu adaptation of 'King Lear' by the famous nineteenth century Parsi theatre. The play, starring Talat Hussain, was not as cohesive as 'Habib Mamou' and lapsed into melodrama from time to time, but it was thoroughly enjoyable. Of course, unlike Shakespeare's original, 'Sufaid Khoon' had to have a happy ending with a much-wiser Lear duly restored to his throne and virtuous Cordelia at his side. There were also song-and-dance sequences -- rather sedate compared to modern Bollywood -- but it was easy to see how the Shakespeare adaptations of the Parsi theatre inspired the Indian film industry in later years.

Shortly before this Zia Mohyeddin had given a riveting talk for The Shakespeare Society of Pakistan. He said that King Lear had given desi movies that great line 'Mein kahan hoon? (Where am I?)'. Zia also spoke about stagecraft and how difficult it is for a young actor to master Shakespeare's language whereby he quoted John Gielgud who said you must learn to 'float' on it, without breaking its rhythms. To hear Zia read Shakespeare is a sheer delight and he introduced us to the folio version of Hamlet's speech 'To Be Or Not To Be' which is quite different to the one that most of us know.

And now I am settling down to read a new Pakistani English novel A Case of Exploding Mangoes by Mohammed Hanif about General Ziaul Haq.

Muniza Shamsie has edited three anthologies of Pakistani English writing.

Letter from KARACHI

MUNEZA SHAMSIE

There seems to be a great spurt of cultural activity in the city from literary, music and other events at the T2 Cafe, I had written about earlier and last weekend, there was a well-attended panel discussion on Fault Lines: Stories of 1971 edited by Niaz Zaman and Asif Farrukhi. This is a really important and groundbreaking collection, because it brings together, for the first time, so many different, moving and often, unflinching stories of that war, told by writers in both Pakistan and Bangladesh. I cannot presume to imagine/comment upon what anyone from Bangladesh might have to say about this, but from this my own perspective I think the book can go a long way towards generating a meaningful dialogue.

I have been dismayed, always, at the public anatomy that surrounds 1971 in Pakistan which poet Kaleem Omar summed up, aptly, in his satirical English poem 'It Did Not Really Happen', published in his anthology Wordfall (1975). The tales in Fault Lines capture the human dimensions of the conflict, whether they are set in Bangladesh, Pakistan or the Diaspora. For me, the realistic stories have a much stronger resonance than the metaphorical ones, because they reflect the essence of that upheaval and bring out both the horror that befell Bengal as well as the remarkable acts of humanity amid great carnage.

The panel at the T2 function consisted of Niaz Zaman, Asif Farrukhi, their two contributors, Asad Muhammad and Intizar Hussain, and journalist Saima Hussain. During question time, one of the issues which emerged very clearly was that 1971 has such passing mention in our textbooks that a younger generation is often shocked to discover what really happened, either through a study course in a foreign college or a Bangladeshi friend there.

At T2E the younger people were among the most engaged members of the audience: they wanted answers. No, there were no heated arguments. Instead, people listened and wanted to hear what the others had to say. It was really interesting the way the discourse kept going round in circles: it would move away from one subject and then come back to it, to be fleshed out further. Lots of opinions were aired and expressed, from the complicity of the media and Bhutto's role, to analogies between Bangladesh in 1971 and modern Baluchistan - and amnesia, or memory loss, as a coping mechanism. I came away thinking that if any book could achieve all this, it had achieved a great deal.

Onto lighter things... the Arts Council Auditorium was finally opened a couple of years ago and has become pivotal to the city's performing arts. Almost opposite, is the equally new National Academy of Performing Arts (NAPA) headed by acting legend Zia Mohyeddin and housed in one of Karachi's pre-Partition buildings, the Hindu Gymkhana, the smaller of the city's two, pink and domed Rajastani-style structures. So far, I have seen two productions of their Repertory Theatre Company.

traffic more legion than usual. Her father was fidgeting, his British accent clipping off the edges of his sentences.

"The house is on Road 8, no? Shouldn't have come this way. Now we're late."

"It's fine," said her aunt, "We get to be late. And they must understand the traffic. They live in this neighbourhood after all." She eyed the immobile snake of cars with distaste. Juthi smoothed her kameez over her knees and watched the street traffic thrum and throb. If there wasn't love to begin with, then she had to count on it creating itself out of nothing. Could it be deep enough, wide enough to contain her ridiculous hopeful heart?

By the time Juthi walked into the flat on Road Number 8, she was ready for anyone who showed even a trace of surety. Soon enough, she was enveloped by it. The downright mother, the joking father, her voluble aunt, her sharp-tongued Nana. Even the would-be groom, though he said little, seemed assured in his reserve. She felt all their gazes pulling at her.

Only her father seemed unsure and Juthi found herself gravitating to him. Now, all the confidence seemed suspect, brimming the room with hot air, making it difficult to think. She needed to leave and when she looked at her father, he knew this immediately. The meeting was brought to a close, a second one planned with an enthusiasm Juthi found difficult to believe.

She was startled when the boy appeared in front of her. Her Nana raised his voice in an attempt to create privacy. She found it absurd and touching.

"Let's go for coffee soon," he said. Juthi could only nod. "Could I have your mobile number?"

Juthi fumbled for her phone and when she finally retrieved it, she stared at it blankly. He took the phone from her hand and started entering his number. She was both astonished and relieved but said nothing. He gave it back to her, gently vibrating.

"Missed call from you to me," he said, smiling easily, waving his own phone. "Shurobi... right?" His tongue seemed to be testing the syllables. It was a name only her Nana called her. She watched his lips move in slow motion. She could do this, she thought. Come to know that mouth, those hands. Discover a different arrangement of her heart. One where you knew the end wasn't in sight every bloodrush moment.

"Juthi," she said at last, "You can call me Juthi."

An hour later, they were still in the car, the

Abeer Hoque is a Bangladeshi-American writer.

Manik Bandhopadhyaya, edited by Kayes Ahmed. This is the centenary year of the birth of Manik Bandhopadhyaya, testimony to which is the lavish coverage afforded him by the literature pages of our Bengali dailies. This collection of essays on the writer of the classic Dibratrir Kabya is one that has to be absorbed slowly. Of note are the substantial pieces by two of our foremost writers, Hasan Azizul Huq and Akhtaruzzaman Ilyas.

A three star (\*\*\*) star buy.

We book readers should get more such discounted sales. All thanks to Mohiuddin Bhai of UPL Bangladesh. Who, come to think of it, should send me Badruddin Omar's volumes on the Language Movement free of cost...

Khademul Islam is literary editor of The Daily Star.

In Memory of Afghani Women

(For Those Who Are Dead Are Blessed)  
SHABNAM NADIYA

For a moment I thought it was just another bundle of old clothes Until suddenly it made a movement As if to prove to itself that there was still Something living within.

Enshrouded without name, face or form In dreary dreamless black (nothing elegant about this color) It lay there heaped carelessly upon an empty bed In an empty room Like yesterday's laundry left there and forgotten.

I could find nothing of myself there As, in a moment, that sluggish movement beckoned me To join her in a sisterhood that should never be. It scares me to even glimpse how interchangeable our lives have become How the texture of your skin so easily blends with mine How the roots of your hair dig deep into my scalp How familiar my fingers feel as they caress the echoes of your mind

A hidden wall there is that pushes me back, Something lies in wait Something urges me on to conceive all your sins My underbelly throbs with the pain of the birth that you now give As the earth prepares for the deadly afterbirth.

They have slit open your breast For all the world to see How bloodless and quiescent your heart lies, They have scraped your womb clean Of any filth that may cling They have picked your bones clean Of other past sins. They have healed you with a purifying wound that has finally cleansed you Body and soul Now that you are beautiful You no longer need the sun's light to steal a look at Who you once were Or even at What you might have become.

Woman of the bright air, you sear my eyes at a single glance You engulf my mind whole And every time you die My rise from the ashes becomes ever distant.

Shabnam Nadiya is a short story writer and translator.