

## SHORT STORY

## Experience

ANIS CHOUDHURY  
(Translated by Kaiser Haq)

The question has been on my mind since that day. I could of course ask the man if I met him again. Actually, we weren't supposed to meet at all. The whole thing happened quite by chance. And there's no guarantee that I'll recognize him if we meet again. Even if I have seen him sometime, I don't remember where.

I'm not in the habit of going out without a specific purpose. Hotels or restaurants are far from my mind. But it was fiendishly hot and I'd been tormented by thirst since midday. I longed for chilled water, but dared not risk it. I thought I'd rather wet my whistle with tea. I entered the first restaurant that caught my eye. Not a three or four star joint, though quite clean and tidy. But impossibly crowded. Every table was taken, four chairs to each. Perhaps seeing me turn around in despair, someone waved beckoningly. He was all by himself. I sat down opposite. He gave me a once over and concentrated on his cup of tea. I called for a waiter, but couldn't draw anyone's attention. I didn't have much time on hand, either. I had to leave by one-thirty. I had something at stake -- I couldn't afford to slip up.

Business had been dull for some months. I dealt in spare parts but my supplier was letting me down. Writing letters didn't help. That's why I wanted to have a face to face with the sales manager today and solve the problem once for all. The appointment was at a quarter past two. I kept glancing at the

Noticing my impatience, the man spoke up. 'Shouting won't help. No one will come before half an hour. You may share mine if you're in a hurry.'

I was wondering about the propriety of such intimacy with a stranger. On the other hand, if I wanted tea in a hurry, there was no choice. Most of the restaurant's clientele came for tea. Maybe that's why the tables were set with upturned teacups. Customers turned them over and poured out tea from pots. Before I could say anything the stranger began pouring tea from the little teapot in front of him into an empty cup. I helped myself to the milk and sugar.

At one point I tried to take a look at the man. But what was there to see? His eyes were hidden behind dark glasses, his shirt was buttoned up to the collar, which was clearly grimy. It probably hadn't seen a laundry for many days. The shirt pocket was like a small briefcase stuffed with papers and crumpled letters. There was also a packet of cigarettes. His face was pocked with smallpox scars. He had a graying head of hair. His fingers had rings set with stones of varied hue. He was the kind of fellow I couldn't confidently assert I had ever seen. That I had never seen him, passingly perhaps, was equally hard to claim. People like him were ubiquitous. They featured in every phase of our memories. I prepared to get up. But would it look nice if I left without offering to pay? I hesitated a little, then said, 'If you don't mind, I'd like to share the bill.'

The man had a lighted cigarette between his fingers. He raised it to his lips; the flame glowed brighter. Blowing out a mouthful of smoke, he said, 'You may leave if you wish.



Don't worry about the bill! 'That doesn't seem right -- we aren't even acquainted.' What he said next startled me. 'No harm if you don't know me. I know you quite well.' I was pressed for time, so I left in the confused state into which I had been plunged. I kept wondering who this stranger

was who knew me quite well. Fixing me with a haughty stare as I was getting ready to leave, he had said that his name was Akhter, but people also called him Abu Miah.

My hurry didn't pay off. Despite my punctuality the work didn't get done, because I couldn't get hold of the man in Sales. He had gone to the airport to deal with an emergency. I'd have to try again the following day. I didn't feel put out, though. By then my consciousness had been taken over by the recently discovered Akhter.

If he knew me well he'd been witness to many little events in my life. Everyone's life was a tissue of varied happenings, some showing them in a positive -- some in a negative -- light. What incident had he witnessed?

Couldn't it be the case that I had actually seen him but had no recollection? Judging from his expression, he didn't seem to be hinting at knowledge of anything commendable in my life. A couple of events in my experience were still upsetting to recollect. Could it be one of these? One day I had queued up at a busy counter to buy a First Class train ticket. When I got back the change I found that I'd been handed 50 taka more. The bell was ringing to announce impending departure. There was no time, but later, when there was time to spare I didn't go back to return the money. What if someone behind the counter had noticed what had happened? Could that person be Akhter?

Or take that person I encountered one night. I was driving home through a fierce storm. It was pouring. Someone waved at me. There was a woman beside him. I slowed down and heard the man pleading, 'Sir, if you could give us a lift! The girl's very ill, it's an emergency.' No way, one mustn't give a lift to strangers at night, whoever they might be. I rolled up the window and drove on.

Was it that man I'd met again? Was the girl still alive?

Maybe it wasn't either of these men. Yet

my heart quailed at a certain realization. It seemed that at any moment a particular loose end might be tied up to complete the lineaments of a story. Piercing the smoke-screen of the past, the gaze that confronted me might be that of this mysterious man.

It was the night of my wedding -- which had been suddenly arranged. I didn't realize it at the beginning, but it gradually dawned on me that somebody had had to pay the price for my joy. I recall that after the crowd of guests had taken leave that night, I'd noticed a lone figure in a back row, just sitting there and puffing on a cigarette. Just like today, in the darkness of that night, it was the cigarette that caught my attention. Was it the same man I'd just met?

Would I meet him again -- suddenly? What could I do if I did? What could I say to him even if he had been the protagonist in one of my varied experiences? What could I ask him? Were you behind the ticket counter, beside the road, or in the back row beneath the *shamiana*? Who knows what Akhter might say in reply? Maybe he'd reply with the same mysterious smile, 'What have you been able to share in life? Forget all that.'

It seemed I'd discover him again, somewhere, sometime, as I had today. Yet, I'd never get to know of which experience of mine he had become a part, or when.

Anis Chowdhury (1929-1990) was a noted Bengali novelist and short story writer. Kaiser Haq is a poet and professor of English at Dhaka University.

## First Proof and Atlas

ISOBEL SHIRLAW

Penguin India's third book of new writing from India showcases some impressive young fictional talent, namely Kishore Valicha, whose short story, 'Strawberries', is a darkly explosive fantasy of sensuality wherein a man wishes to file a complaint against a strawberry-vendor at a police station, who has tricked him into buying fake fruit. He captivates the incompetent police officer with his luxurious tale of strawberries larger and juicier and redder than life that little by little become interchangeable within his unfolding description of the vendor's alleged seduction.

The Saint of Lost Things' by Joan Pinto is a carefully wrought exploration of faith -- a portrait of an elderly woman's immeasurable trust in the mystical powers of a miniature plaster figurine of Saint Anthony, observed through the eyes of her grand-daughter, and how that faith is put to the test through the loss of the figurine, and then, less comically, her son.

Many of the non-fiction contributions are of an equally high standard. Shankar Sharma's 'My Lovely Restaurant' is a blistering account of his time as a waiter in an Indian restaurant in a dead-end town in Scotland. He wryly recalls the depressing sight of the manager smoking heroin in the fire escape while inside he had to endure the rancid farts and belches of the local clientele stuffing their drunken faces with repugnant fluorescent filth that had been scraped off the kitchen floor and thinly dressed up as Punjabi cuisine: a delicious read.

Ashok Malik offers a pleasing enough account of a curious interaction with an Ethiopian taxi driver in Washington DC, but it is Aman Sethi who stands out, in this collection, as a writer of real promise; 'Khullam Khulla' -- his quietly measured study of law-enforcement on the streets of Delhi -- is an exquisite piece of journalism -- so methodical and unhesitatingly wry in its tone that it sounds refreshingly old-fashioned. He tells of the Khullam Khulla way of crime (Out in the open) and how, although the introduction of CCTV surveillance has succeeded in forcing the otherwise complicit policeman to react, on the other hand, the Khullam Khulla Inversion shows that "in a scenario of complete supervision, complete visibility is often the best camouflage."

In his second edition of *Atlas* -- an attractive and thoughtfully compiled Delhi-based literary journal -- the editor, Sudeep Sen, offers a rich variety of new work -- writing, translations and images -- contributed, despite this edition's 'Canadian theme' -- from a diverse range of artists from India, Canada and far further afield.

Some of the big names advertised on the cover, such as Margaret Atwood, Seamus Heaney and Vikram Seth, disappointingly feature only as the subject of Heather Spears' collection of fairly ordinary literary portraits. And Salman Rushdie, the journal's cover star, 'features' insofar as he is the subject of an interview conducted during a recent literary festival.



In addition to a number of short stories, of varying quality (David Gensens's 'Leo Fell' -- an account of a man's breakdown following his separation from his wife -- is one of the best), there is some unusually strong poetry.

Tariq Latif, a British Pakistani writer, attacks what he identifies as the pious façade of religious politics in his poem 'Iqbal's Halal Shop', presenting a group of Punjabi men queuing in a butcher's shop to discuss the merits of political Islam while they leer at a young woman's far meatier breasts (see inset). H Masud Taj's superbly original take on contemporary 'Rules of Engagement' -- 18 Questions for Embedded Botanists', provides a satirical guide for journalists investigating wrongdoings in the plant world. And Ruth Padel has contributed a fine new poem in which she pays heavy stylistic homage to James Fenton's 'Jerusalem', as she shows us around the church of the nativity in Bethlehem, juxtaposing the Biblical original with the war-torn ceremonies of Easter 2002.

On the non-fiction side, Barbara Cansino's delightful 'Canadian Winter' steals the show -- a heartwarming tale of everyday life in Winnipeg, where the wind-chill factor brings winter temperatures down to minus 60 degrees Celsius, and where the five-minute frostbite statistic has made native Winnipeggers inspire heroic awe in their compatriots -- a lovingly sung paean to home.

Isobel Shirlaw is a freelance contributor. She lives and works in Dhaka.

### Iqbal's Halal Shop

TARIQ LATIF

He leans on the blade to scrape the fat from the chopping board; then he sharpens the knives, puts on display choice cuts of lamb legs; shoulders and necks, plump pink chickens, liver and kidneys and some masala fish; whispers bismillah and turns on the till.

Iqbal sips tea, reads the Punjabi Times till the first customer, who ambles in, places his fat hands on the counter and asks for two masala fish and a shoulder of lamb. Iqbal sharpens the cutting knife, opens the meat to the pink bone. They talk about Iraq as Iqbal cuts

the flesh into small pieces. He takes the cuts of fish and puts them in a bag; catches the till greets the waiting customers, wipes his pink hands on his overalls and begins to trim the fat from a leg of lamb. Nawaz, the mill owner, sharpens Iqbal's mind with his political chat. Masala

for your survival is to know your opposition, masala for the soul is to submit yourself to Allah who cuts Kaffirs away from heaven. Nawaz sharpens the tone by questioning suicide bombing, to till the fields of morality of his small audience of fat men, who mumble fate, destiny, as a girl in a pink

T-shirt stops near them and they are tickled pink by her fleshy breasts. The Gorey needs masala jokes Ahmed the mechanic as his member grows fat with desire. The other men chip in with lusty cuts about her ample cleavages, talking in Punjabi till Iqbal mumbles, what can you want luv? The girl sharpens

the atmosphere by replying in Punjabi, which sharpens the blood in the men's loins to little blades, their pink mouths drop open in unison and there is silence till Iqbal utters, who learn you Punjabi? I learnt about masala and Punjabi from my Punjabi girlfriend. Her statement cuts the men's sausages into chipolatas. Suddenly the fat

men cough. Iqbal sharpens a knife, slices some masala fish. The girl in pink smiles as he hands her the cuts. He catches the till, says goodbye and slips on some fat.



### Letter from BROOKLYN

### April Days

ASHEKA TROBERG

March winds and April showers  
bring forth May flowers.  
Red sky at night,  
shepherd's delight;  
Red sky at morning,  
shepherd's warning.

It was the good-natured gentleman, Harold, who had mentioned the first three lines of this rhyme. I had made a mental note of the lines instantaneously. It may sound outlandish but I have never heard this rhyme before. The rest of the lines of the rhyme were later added by another person. Truly there had been a lot of showers in April here in Brooklyn, making the roads wet and dark, adding a special scent of fresh rain droplets on the budding leaves. The budding green and the dampness remind me of another life, another time and another place from my childhood.

Mr. Arif owns the Kolmilota Grocery, at the Church McDonalds corner. We have known him since 2003. He at one point very generously adopted one of our cats. There is a good size fish tank inside their store. In there large-sized healthy fishes constantly swim around. One can choose a fish from there. They would clean and process it in a few minutes ready to be taken home for cooking. I have been seeking his suggestions, advices on how to get historical information regarding the Brooklyn Bangladeshi community. He told me that the Dhaka Club Film and Music Award was going to be held on the 25th of April.

I must be honest and admit I am very picky about movies. I'd heard that the Dhaka movie industry had its glorious time during the 60s and 70s. Since then the slide has been downhill. I had told Arif Bhai that he knew my views, that I could not find any motivation to buy tickets for the show, but if the organizers would get me a few tickets then maybe Stefan (my husband) and I would go. Arif Bhai was going to find out and let me know the next day.

That evening I came home to find out that my elder brother Sunny's friend had come from Dhaka and was going to be performing at the award show. The majority of his Bangladeshi fans know him as 'Nobel'. He offered us a pair of tickets as we were on the phone with him.

As planned weeks ahead, the next morning, the 25th, we got up fairly early in the morning for the Museum of Natural History. My neighbor Helen, who teaches at Brooklyn college and volunteers her time at the Museum of Natural History, had given us a few vouchers that covered all the special event as well. Perhaps she knew her vouchers would be truly appreciated by a museum hopper like myself. I had been to this museum several times before. And I know I will be there many times in future.

The morning was spent watching 'Cosmic Collision', a mind blowing show narrated by Robert Redford at the planetarium dome, the dinosaur show and the colorful butterfly show. A little cute Korean boy

wearing an orange shirt attracted an orange butterfly who settled on his arm for quite a while. As I tried to take a picture, the butterfly flew away. The boy looked like he had lost his most precious possession. He followed the orange butterfly, offering his hands to it with a, "please comeback" look. I felt like my heart broke. I said sorry to him.

Later at the day we went to the 5th Ave where Manhattan center is located. I needed a place to freshen up and went to the Fridays in that corner. We sat by the street overlooking the central post office, the rush hour taxi marathon and sporadic appearance of rickshaws. We devoured on mozzarella sticks, baked potatoes with dill, Buffalo wings with blue cheese, carrots and fish stick platter. Surprisingly the drink actually took away my headache. When the check came, I saw the first line read, "Thank God it is Friday". Only a few days ago a co-worker had told me that the acronym we use so often at work, 'TGIF' had originated from this restaurant. I took the receipt with me as a proof of that statement. Around 6 pm, I heard from Nobel bhai. Their limo had just crossed the Manhattan Bridge so we figured they would be here anytime soon. As I crossed the street, I saw an ocean of Bangladeshis on the sidewalk of Manhattan Center. A white limousine came down the road. Stefan and I proceeded a little bit closer to the car and Nobel bhai came out from his white limo, straight to us and said "hi". We talked a little. He gave us the tickets and had to go inside. Stefan and I were more than sure that we had heard his devoted fans' inquisitive murmurs and envious looks directed at us. Is this the thrill and kick a celebrity gets every single day of their life? An Italian photographer was taking pictures of this and looked a bit lost and we exchanged our business cards. He was flying back to France the next day.

The audience was ecstatic, the energy was everywhere and the live show was on the huge hanging monitors at the two sides of the stage. The voice of the opening announcer sounded like he was a refugee from the World Wrestling Federation or a Boxing Championship at some casino in Las Vegas. Then came a female announcer in a sari and the show really started, with an artist playing a fiddle, the national anthem of Bangladesh and the United States of America. We left at 9 pm. At the exit we witnessed some confrontation between a young Bangladeshi fellow and the security. None of the organizers were there. The security had pushed the guy. So he had called the police. The police seemed to be peacefully listening to both sides. I was taking pictures of this escapade. The security acted like he was going to take my camera away. I assume he refrained from doing so only because the police was present. We walked into the dark street, the McDonalds lights were our north star. The night décor of the Empire State building was looking gorgeous. Every night it takes a fresh new color of lights.

My mind, though, was preoccupied with the thought that I would have to get to work at 8:30 am sharp next morning.

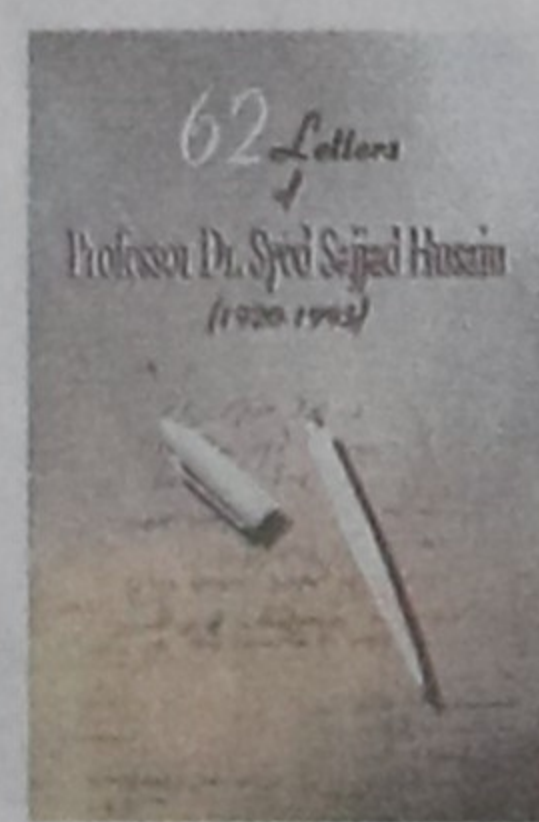
Asheka Troberg lives in Brooklyn and is a member of the editorial team of www.brooklynvoice.com.

## A seedy, unsavoury air

KHADEMUL ISLAM

All revolutions produce counter-revolutions, a dialectic that is played out over the long term in an inexorable cycle. In the case of Bangladesh, sadly enough, the counter revolution of 1975 came shockingly early, and in a bloody manner. In these collected letters (mostly translated from Bengali) of Dr Sajjad Husain, one can glimpse its mindset. It is not a pretty sight. On December 16, 1971 Dr. Sajjad Husain, professor of English literature and ardent Pakistani regime man, was the serving vice chancellor of Dhaka University. He was arrested and jailed, and after his release left for Saudi Arabia. There he stayed (on a Bangladeshi passport) teaching English till 1985, until his return to Dhaka on the back of changed political circumstances and stayed here till his death in 1995.

In his letters (published by Al-Helal Publications, London and Dhaka, December 2004) written to a companion of like beliefs, a Mr. M. Tajammul Hussain who was part of the London-Dhaka axis of anti-1971, anti-liberation cohort groups, Dr. Sajjad Husain reveals himself to be the quintessential counter-revolutionary, conspiratorial persona. He saw enemies everywhere, and was given to fulminations against India, 'Hinduized' Bengali culture and language (*Pahela Boishak* and other Bengali festivities), the Bangladesh press, the Awami League and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the BBC Bengali service, even his own Jamaat-i-Islami. In the context of Bangladesh's war of independence the letters collectively have a seedy, unsavoury air about them, and it is



hard to dismiss them as the rantings of a deluded old man whom history had passed by.

Nationally we have been somewhat 'desensitized' to the issue of academics being willing aides of the 1971 Pakistani military regime by the disclosure of the names of the other Dhaka University teachers in the list of collaborators compiled by the War Crimes Finding Committee. Even then, one is taken aback at reading these letters of Dr Sajjad Husain, who was an academic of some repute. It is also surprising that the recipient of these letters saw it fit to publish them. Dr Sajjad questions the scale of the 1971 genocide. He routinely makes, apparently in all sincerity, statements such as "A man who was a member of Albadr in 1971, one Mr. Aminul Huq, has written an account of his experiences in prison after the fall of Pakistan. It's a remarkable book... The author saw me a few days ago. His faith in Islam is praiseworthy." This is belief in Islam gone insane! It is a sentiment that made the reviewer almost fling the book across the room. Still, one has to concede that these kinds of books should be necessary reading for us all, if for nothing else than as a reminder of the face of Anti-1971.

The other fact that emerges from this unhealthy, at times decidedly surreal correspondence is the extent to which despotic sheikhdoms/kingdoms of the Middle East generally, and Saudi Arabia in particular, gave, and still gives, refuge to former 1971 collaborators in the name of Islam. This protection afforded by our petrodollar overlord--paradoxically the leader of the Sunni Muslim world as well as bedmate of Crusader Bush--explains to an extent why the huge bulk of 1971 war criminals not only evade justice, but continue to play a large part in our national life.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.