

SHORT STORY

HASAN AZIZUL HUQ
(translated by Hasan Ferdous)

It was April. Bhushan, having just stepped out of his hut, was surveying the sky. It was hot; the tall trees on the west side of the shallow canal had not yet cast its shadows on the water.

Bhushan could not wait any longer. He hopped onto his small dingy boat and began rowing. If the boat strayed a bit, the sun glared right into his eyes, revealing his unshaven face. In the glare of the sun, the exposed part of his face shone like a mirror, and made him look rather unsightly. Bhushan grimaced and cursed. The mid-day sun was one obvious target of his anger, but in fact nothing in sight was spared of his invectives. Yet, if he closed his mouth, Bhushan - with his small eyes twitching from inside his forehead - was rather quite innocent looking. He was the kind of person who would calmly say his name and declare that he was not one of the lowly *rishis*. As if he was deeply ashamed that his surname was Das, but nonetheless he was not a cobbler by profession.

In fact, Bhushan was a farmer. Now fifty years old, farming was the only profession he had known all his life. This truth was written all over his body - anyone could read it for himself. His muscles were all swollen. The eggs on his calves seemed like hard balls, and a vein protruding from his heel ran through his knee.

All these convincingly proved that Bhushan was and had been a farmer all his life. He had worked only with the soil, and with nothing else. He had planted seeds, cleared weeds, cut paddy and carried rice on his shoulders to the granary.

And this was also true that except for his little hut and some ten kaatha of land near his home, he owned nothing else. This is how Bhushan would explain his situation: "You see, my parents were rather well-off, in fact you can call them landowners - *Zamindars*." Having said this, Bhushan, with his twitching eyes, would cast his glance towards the horizon and survey the little field with his eyes. His bones were thick, his paws large. After years of tilling and shoveling, his hands had become flat. And after years of carrying loads, his head, flat like a square tin plate, had sunk inside his shoulders. His never combed his rough and graying hair. A little tuft of hair sat on his top head that gave the appearance of a wig. If you pressed his tuft of hair a bit, it seemed it would drop off and reveal his steel-like skull.

Bhushan was best known for a particular body language. While at work in the field, he would raise his neck every now and then and stare at the horizon far away. Sometimes he stared at the sky before returning to work. Who knows what he thought while staring at the sky above or the horizon afar.

There were quite a few reasons for his sour mood today. Rows of paddy were heaped on the farmland in the dry lake. One could see them as far as the eyes stretched. Birds were pecking grains all over the place, but he had none at his home. After repaying the loan taken last monsoon, none was left of his share of grain. Not even a bit of he left for feeding his two

One Day in April*



artwork by amina

cows. Those two were puffing. On top of this, his stupid little son was missing from home. At least the boy could prove useful by taking the cows out for grazing on the green.

In the morning, hoping that someone might hire him, Bhushan had gone out with his scythe. He did get a job at the Mallik's, where they asked him to fix the fence. He was busy doing that, when he suddenly saw three boys approaching him. Bhushan was surprised to find that the three carried guns, just the way policemen did. Two of them wore no shirts. Bhushan immediately recognized those two: they were children from a neighboring village. They went to school and also worked on farmland, at least that's what Bhushan knew. The one with his shirt on was unfamiliar to him.

"What's up Bhushan? The new boy asked. Bhushan stared at him, unable to respond.

"You have to join us, OK?" One of the two he knew said.

"Got to hold the gun like this, you got to fight."

One of them - he also wore no shirt - aimed his gun up at the sky and fired. A loud sound exploded. Bhushan, scared, dropped his scythe.

"Uh, you scared me, my God, what a sound!" Bhushan said nervously.

The one with his shirt on spoke, his eyes yellow, his stare like that of an eagle, the sides of his nose

wrinkled, "Bhushan, make this country your own, make it free. We can no longer stay with Pakistan."

Bhushan had heard about some disturbances. Dhaka was in the midst of a turmoil, people were dying there; same thing in Khulna. Of course, these were rumors. Disturbances were nothing new in the country.

Watching the gun and hearing its sound, he felt scared.

"We want you all to join us. What d'you say, won't you be able to use the gun, eh?"

The three boys soon left.

Bhushan did not understand what was going on. Those kids were carrying police guns, that itself was a serious matter, he thought.

Bhushan's payment for his day's work was 1.50 taka. As soon as he reached home, his mood soured. The two cows were still standing there tied. As there was no lunch to be cooked, Bhushan's wife brought some stale rice soaked in cold water that was saved from morning. His two infant boys - with no clothes on - were deep asleep in the shade of a coconut tree. Bhushan's hut was exposed from all sides; only the coconut tree offered some shade, but his hut was burning hot. Bhushan asked, "Where is Haridas?"

His wife replied, "He has gone out somewhere since morning."

Bhushan's little yellow eyes burst in flames, "Heck, freaking bastard, I am going to bury him alive today, let him come home first."

There was nothing to be done with the two cows. Their large black eyes lit up as soon as they saw Bhushan. "See if you can get them something to eat," he told his wife.

"Me, from where?" his wife said.

"Oh, stop blathering. Do, if you can, as I say."

It was after this conversation that Bhushan had taken his boat out. Boiling under the April sun, the canal's muddy water had become real hot. The air too was hot like fire. Bhushan could hear the creepy sounds of grass burning on the field. Rather absent-mindedly, he looked at the shallow canal; out there near the horizon, the heat shimmered. Beyond its white smoke, villages stood along an uneven green line.

He could still remember his early childhood. On the east side of their courtyard stood a tall mango tree. As he reflected, Bhushan could see himself even now lying naked in the shade of that tree on a hot summer afternoon. He could even see his waistband. His father had a pair of drooping, graying moustache. He could see him too. As if to see his father a little better, Bhushan stuck his head out and cast his glance above the canal. With the sun about to set, the tall trees on the sides of the canal had begun blowing soft breeze. Bhushan saw new leaves sprouting; he felt a strong wind blow by him as he rowed past a berry tree. Twigs and creepers from the tree hung close to the water.

"But there is nothing particularly serious; Bhushan thought for a while, before coming to the conclusion. Nothing has changed in this country. This

canal has been flowing who knows for how long. God almighty knows who owns it. I do exactly what my father did. Even the berry tree by the canal remains the same.

Bhushan shook his large, rather cumbersome head in earnest, "Even Haridas, that sonofabitch, remains the same." With the movement of head, his rough, thick hair hung down on all four sides. He continued rowing sullenly. He was edging closer to the bank.

The village bazaar was not far. The canal, like a silver wire, had snaked through the lake far to the south. Bhushan took his boat towards the middle of the canal, anchored it right behind Ratan's grocery store and walked down carrying gourd leaves, plantain and a couple of bottle-gourds. Bhushan breathed heavily as he came down to the edge of the bazaar. He was already late, the bazaar was bustling with people; practically every well-bodied man was there. It seemed more crowded than usual, the noise was almost deafening. Suddenly Bhushan saw Haridas, sitting in a teashop nearby, happily chatting and howling. Enraged, Bhushan began quivering, his brown eyes fired up and his face turned totally square. Bhushan would have sprung on Haridas like a tiger, but he had the vegetable loads on his head, his hands were busy too. He did not know what to do. Angry like hell, he quickly put down his loads and rushed to Haridas screaming. Standing on the edge of the shop, he roared, "Come here, you sonofabitch, freaking swine, you good-for-nothing, I won't spare you today."

As soon as Haridas saw Bhushan, his mouth dried up. Scared, he began coming down from the shop. Bhushan was at the bottom, as if ready to tear off Haridas's head. Then at that very moment, some loud, grave sounds came floating from the side of the canal. Bhushan knew these sounds were made by motor launches, especially when they docked at the bank. But here, in this shallow canal, one never saw a motor launch docking.

Bhushan and Haridas were now facing each other. At that very moment, bang, a bomb blew off with a loud noise. Bhushan could see the tall and ancient tamarind tree shaking from its roots. Crows atop the tree fluttered and crowed loudly. The sounds again hit them - first a very loud one, so loud that they tore one's eardrums; then came sharp, metallic sounds pouring out of a machine made of iron. Bhushan's loin-cloth flapped against his knee. With his two feet stuck to the ground, Haridas stood in front of him dumb-founded. The din of the bazaar died down, and a silence descended. It was impossible to describe such a silence. Fear rose high in the sky; piercing screams made the silence impregnable.

The sounds were heard intermittently. First a somber *gummmm*, followed by a metallic echo - *chiiiiin*. Soon Bhushan could no more hear the sound of the motor launch. Bhushan, following Haridas's scared glance, turned around and saw that from the side of the river, galloping through the alley, a man was coming towards them. He wore khaki shirt and trousers, a cap hung over his head sideways. He was a

fair skinned, tall, and large man. The man was screaming loud, but Bhushan was unable to figure out what he was saying. He hurled such words as *beiman* (ungrateful), *malaun* (idol worshiper heathens), *kafir* (unbelievers). Bhushan heard those words and kept staring at the short handgun in the man's hand. As if this man was multiplying himself, Bhushan soon saw another man, just like the first one, running next to each other. With a clicking sound, they came walking up the alley and took position along the riverbank. Soon they heard a new sound: tat a tat. His ears began buzzing. By this time, Haridas had moved to the side a bit. Bhushan, his eyes moist, looked at the April sky rather absent-mindedly. The sun was still glaring atop the tall trees. Again he heard the sound, tat a tat. This time Bhushan saw people falling off, just the way tall trees fell off once cut from their trunks, and lying down unhurriedly.

Thus far Bhushan had stood still; most people in the bazaar had also remained still. Suddenly the silence was broken, and people began running screaming aloud. As they ran, some of them stumbled. Some would take a last look at the river and then fall down holding their stomach. Blood would gush, making a squirting sound. The blood flew so rapidly on the shiny earthen road that one could see white foams forming above. Grass became drenched: heavy with drops of blood on top, grass blades began quivering.

The tat a tat sound went unabated. Bodies began piling atop one another, just like gunny bags. Bhushan saw Haridas standing not far away. He was about to run toward him, but instead Haridas fell on the ground. Looking behind, Bhushan saw the man with a short handgun in his hand standing right behind him. His large fair face was sweaty and all red in anger. From very closer quarters, Bhushan saw his two little eye sockets; he could even smell his sweat. The man shouted at the top of his voice, "You bastard, are you a Hindu?"

Bhushan could see nothing any more. His large hands hardened like steel, he looked at the man's throat once or twice, then stared silently for a few moments. Making up his mind, in a quick single jump, he reached Haridas.

Haridas was lying still, only his eyes seemed to suggest any signs of life. Bhushan drew his mouth close to Haridas's face and spoke very softly, "Haridas, my little boy, my darling." With his rough, jagged hand, he caressed over the boy's face and body and spoke lightly in the softest possible voice, "Haridas, my son."

Then there was a single cracking sound. Bhushan's square pillar-like body shook twice, and then stopped, freeing him from all senses.

*Original story title: *Bhushoner ekin*. Abridged for publication. Hasan Azizul Haq's *Agunpakhir* won Prothom Alo's Best Book of the Year award and the Ananda Puroshkar from Kolkata. Hasan Ferdous is a columnist for Dhaka's daily *Prothom Alo*. He lives in New York.



Purbo-Paschim: Mojar Golpo

SAYEEDA JAIGIRDAR

A Bengali cultural cyclone tore through the epicenter of the financial district of downtown Toronto in the first weekend of July. It was the 28th North American Bengali Conference in which Bengalis from North America as well as Kolkata and Bangladesh converged in a cultural rhapsody. Torontonians looked on as ladies strolled in crisp cotton sarees, while the men rivaled them in colorful *kurtas* and the occasional *dhoti*.

I was caught by surprise. There I was, toiling for a couple of weeks getting the house painted and spring-cleaned in anticipation of my parents arriving from Dhaka for the summer. They arrived, and I was busy trying to impress my mother with brushed-up domestic skills when Mikhaela, my five-year-old, told her "O Nani! Mumy has been cleaning for ever and she is mad with us if we make a mess!" As my mother smiled, I ran to catch the ringing phone. It was Rehana bhabi who breathlessly informed me: "Bhabi, what are you doing at home? Such a *darun* Bengali conference and you are spring cleaning! You can still come for the last day of the conference!"

Resigning myself to the fact that I could never quite reach the standards of my mother's generation, I thereby abandoned my domestic persona in favour of my cultural one.

The Metro Toronto Convention Centre is a humongous conference center in the heart of the financial district of Toronto. It has three gigantic conference rooms with a capacity to seat thousands of audience members. There were two *manchas* going on: the Rabindra Mancha and the Rice Mancha. The former had artists such as Nachiketa Chakrabarty (Song Adunik, Jibon Mukhi - Kolkata) Sharmila Mukhopadhyay (Song-Rabindra Sangeet- Kolkata), Anup Barua (Song-Nuzul Geeti - Bangladesh), while the latter had a brilliant mime by Partha Pratim Majumdar (Paris, France) as well as a Kabya drama by Aruna Haider (Bangladesh, directed by Amar Mukerjee, Toronto). Song recitals were also performed by Ferdose Ara (Bangladesh) and Indrani Sen (Kolkata). As an audience member, I sat quite charmed by it all. But the best was yet to come...

I wandered into one of the smaller conference rooms. While I was aware that a literary seminar was going to take place after a few minutes, I had no clue as to who the speakers or topics were going to be. I settled into a seat. The audience was mostly from West Bengal, and quite mature. I spotted some Bangladeshi friends and waved to them. I asked the lady next to me about the speaker. Her eyes widened and she said: "Ki bolchen? I have been waiting all my life to meet him - it's Sunil, of course!" Sunil! Sunil Gangapadhyay!

The literary seminar was titled 'Mojar Galpo', and the speakers were Sunil Gangapadhyay, Suchitra Bhattacharya and Sirshendu Mukhopadhyay. The presentation was conducted in an informal manner and the writers narrated humorous stories about their lives and their writing. The session was very interactive with the authors fielding questions from the audience and there was much laughter all around.



by his or her background and personal history. Sunil Gangapadhyay's stories and the warm humane manner in which he narrated them conveyed the vital humanity of this author. One of his stories was about the circumstances surrounding his first poem "Ekthi Chithi" (A Letter) published in *Desh* magazine in 1951. During his boyhood days, his father Kalipada Gangapadhyay was of the opinion that the summer holiday months were wasted by young Sunil and his friends. So every day he gave Sunil a task to memorize a long poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson and then translate it into Bengali. Sunil recounted the frustration that he felt as his friends chased kites while he had to struggle with the lyrics of Tennyson's poems. As he noticed that his father was barely comparing the original to the translation, he thought that he might as well write his own poems and pass them as translations of Tennyson's. This ruse was quite successful. And so in this manner, he started to write his own poems. Sunil also talked about his poem "Ekthi Chithi". There was a girl that he interested in, who was a sister of one of his friends. As he could not directly send her a letter, he wrote a poem "Ekthi Chithi" and sent it to "Desh" magazine, to impress her. Sunil narrates with a chuckle and a twinkle in his eyes, that on the day that it was published, she came running to his house with the "Desh" magazine and said: "Dekho Sunil, there is a new poet whose name is similar to yours! *Ki mojar!*"

After the seminar was over, I spoke with Sunil for a few moments. When I told him that I wrote a column for *The Daily Star*, he said he was familiar with the paper and read it occasionally. He also said that he appreciated his readers from Bangladesh and that he had many Bangladeshi fans all over the world. I then asked him if his creative process was influenced by foreign literature such as French or the English traditions. He replied that although he had translated a lot of Tennyson, he was mostly influenced by Bengali literature and that his form and structure came from the traditional classics of Bengali literature. His advice to aspiring writers was this: "Learn from your own classics". In his opinion, we as Bengalis inherit a deep pool of knowledge and culture into which we could dive into to emerge with little gems of wisdom. Before I left, he asked me my name again and said: "Bhalo Theko!" in a warm manner; I felt deeply touched by this man and raconteur who had interpreted the human journey in his own special way and delighted us with his adda.

Sayeeda Jaigirdar's novel-in-progress is *The Song of the Jamdane*.

Yaba Sundori: real life clobbers fiction

MAHMUD RAHMAN

One hot release at this year's Boi Mela was the novel *Yaba Sundori*.

The phrase had only been coined last November with the police campaign against the methamphetamine drug marketed as Yaba. That was our News of the Hour, the Sensation of the Month.

What a sensation that was. It began with a circle of upper-class youth arrested in Banani. Then a midnight raid in Gulshan bagged a drug kingpin. There were rumours of pretty women as suppliers. The aura of sex fringed the whole affair. In one arrest, the seize list included One Viagra Tablet. I hadn't realized Viagra was illegal. If so, it must be to preserve the monopoly of the thousands of 'homeo clinics' in Bangladesh that promise you local medicine for a harder, longer *dampoty jibon*.

Then came the Really Big Drama. The ultimate Yaba Sundori hiding out with her lover. And just as they were about to surrender, the RAB netted them and paraded them before the cameras.

She came into our lives as Nikita. A village girl from Brahmanbaria who climbed up by marrying an MP. He gifted her a Banani flat. She acquired Internet skills and found her way to an online affair with a probashi in Korea. The marriage collapsed and she rejected the lover too. Her final catch, the hotel MD. He had her skin whitened in Bangkok. Flew her to Japan. Showered her with jewellery.

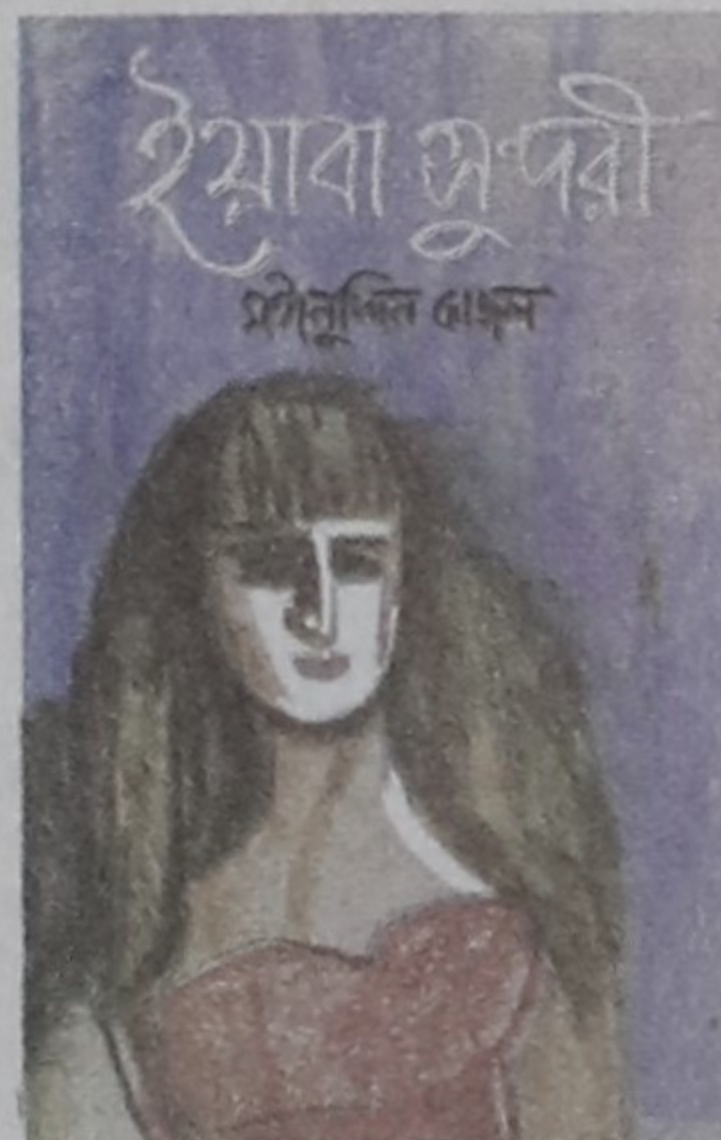
Thanks to the RAB commander and our informative media, we learned of her taste in lingerie. From Brahmanbaria to Victoria's Secret - here was our own B' Sharpe. Perfect material for a reincarnated Thackeray.

Would Moinuddin Kafil's book deliver? Typical novels are tough. But this is Dhaka where authors and translators churn out three, four, seven titles in one year.

Opening the book, I meet Nodi, an MA student who finds a part-time gig as a music and art teacher at a school. Another teacher there, Digonto, falls for her. I read on, expectantly, but for pages and pages, there is no hint of any Yaba beauty. I feel cheated but wonder: would Nodi transform? I look forward to be surprised.

Not a chance. Nodi is the Bangali beauty of our male imagination who breaks into Tagore songs at every turn of the courtship. Digonto pressures her to marry but she resists. She graduates, lands a job. Now we are in another story. We meet Mita, and it seems likely she is our woman. The clues? She doesn't sing, paint, or dance, but she is rich, pretty, and favours hangouts in Gulshan.

Mita is in love with her colleague Ornyo. Finally, on page 79, at a Gulshan restaurant she introduces him to the magic pill. Meanwhile, Nodi gets close to her other colleagues Kotha and Kobita. Living up to their perfect names, they introduce her to their anti-drug cause, the



Now we enter wholly new territory. For much of the remaining pages, he educates us about the harmful effects of drugs. There are lists galore. I'm amazed he left out pictures. From heroin and Yaba to phensidyl and marijuana. Tobacco. Even tea is not spared. Why no mention of *paan-shupari*? Has the author not seen the condition of our people's teeth?

But what happened to Nodi and Digonto? If any readers are still awake, they will find them again on page 147. Digonto brings his brother to take a

marriage proposal to Nodi's sister, her local guardian. The woman lobs a bomb: Nodi is not her real sister but a founding. Nodi overhears the news and falls into a depression. Digonto leads the rescue, persuading Nodi's mother to divulge the secret of where they found her. Then the whole crew of Rang de Basanti youth rushes to Ramu where the police OC dusts off an old GD about a lost girl. The lead brings them to a Supreme Court Barrister, and after some predictable *maan-obhimaan*, father and daughter are reunited.

As the book ends, we are told the Barrister was a hero of the Muktiuddho. He closes the book with, "We won independence by waging the Liberation War. Imbued by patriotism, the new generation will build a drug-free country."

I suspect the story behind this book is not very high-minded. The author probably started with an ordinary love story. The talented woman. A shy suitor. A romance subverted by the discovery of a secret. How many times have we seen this plot in our movies?

Such a story could be a bore to write out yet once again. Last November's news must have brought a bolt of inspiration. 'Yaba Sundori' was selling many a newspaper and magazine. Perhaps it could also market a book.

In came this middle plot. Then the author padded the book with lists of the Negative Consequences of Drugs. With that the novel could not be accused of pandering to sensation. After all, it was now a Tool of Moral Education.

The book flap describes the author as a *kothashahityik*, a writer of literary prose. He and his publisher can make the claim but it would be an affront for us to accept it. Such a book has as much relationship to literature as the film *Koshai Mastan* has to cinema art. There are footpath *chotis* published in Roshomoi Gupta's name that might better qualify. Once in a while they'll at least surprise you, such as with an original metaphor. Readers will look in vain for surprises in *Yaba Sundori*.

Mahmud Rahman's volume of short stories 'Killing the Water' will

On the Banks of the Buriganga

RAMESH P KHANAL

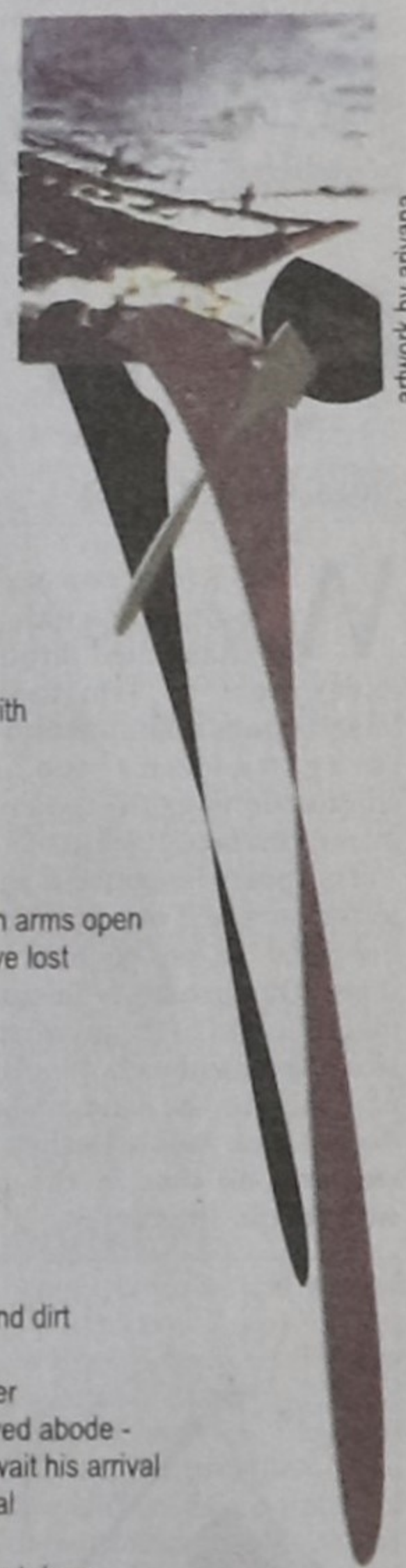
Descending slowly from the sky
Clouds white and dark
Slowly moving
To our villages,
To our mango trees
Breeze blowing north
Flag fluttering over a temple
Birds flying here and nowhere
A strong wave surges
On the banks of the Buriganga

Boatmen run for cover
But drenched in the sudden
Mid-day shower from Heaven
Heaving a sigh of relief
From the scorching heat wave
This sudden boon they're blessed with
The Rain: a blessing in disguise
On the banks of the Buriganga

Rain dropping incessantly
On the Buriganga
Where she embraces them with both arms open
As if she was waiting long for her love lost
For the arrival
Splash - each sound makes her
Gleeful with pleasure
Cool raindrops, fresh from Heaven
On the banks of the Buriganga

I can see boatmen running for cover
Heavy gusts of wind
With chilly rainwater
Washes away their daylong sweat and dirt
Fishermen with the day's catch
Try to reach the bank, towards shelter
What they call as their abode - beloved abode -
A tiny hut where a family of seven await his arrival
With the day's catch for a hearty meal
First raindrops of this season
That arrives after a spell of dry and hot days
Buriganga so desperately waiting for rain
To cleanse her from the sins committed by men
Naked children running playing games
Oblivious to sins of their parents, hunger and distress
Wait for them in this world
I see from here lives under the spell of the season's first rain
On the banks of the Buriganga

Buriganga cries with pleasure at
Every drop of rain from Heaven
Wet
And cool
Standing here
I too long to wash away sins
That I've never committed
On the banks of the Buriganga
Buriganga!
Flowing mightily towards her destination
- the Sea -
Where she will deposit
Everybody's sins including mine
And I know that one day she will swallow me
And embrace me in her lap
From where never will I return to these worldly woes
As she embraces raindrops from Heaven
On the banks of the Buriganga.



artwork by ariyana