

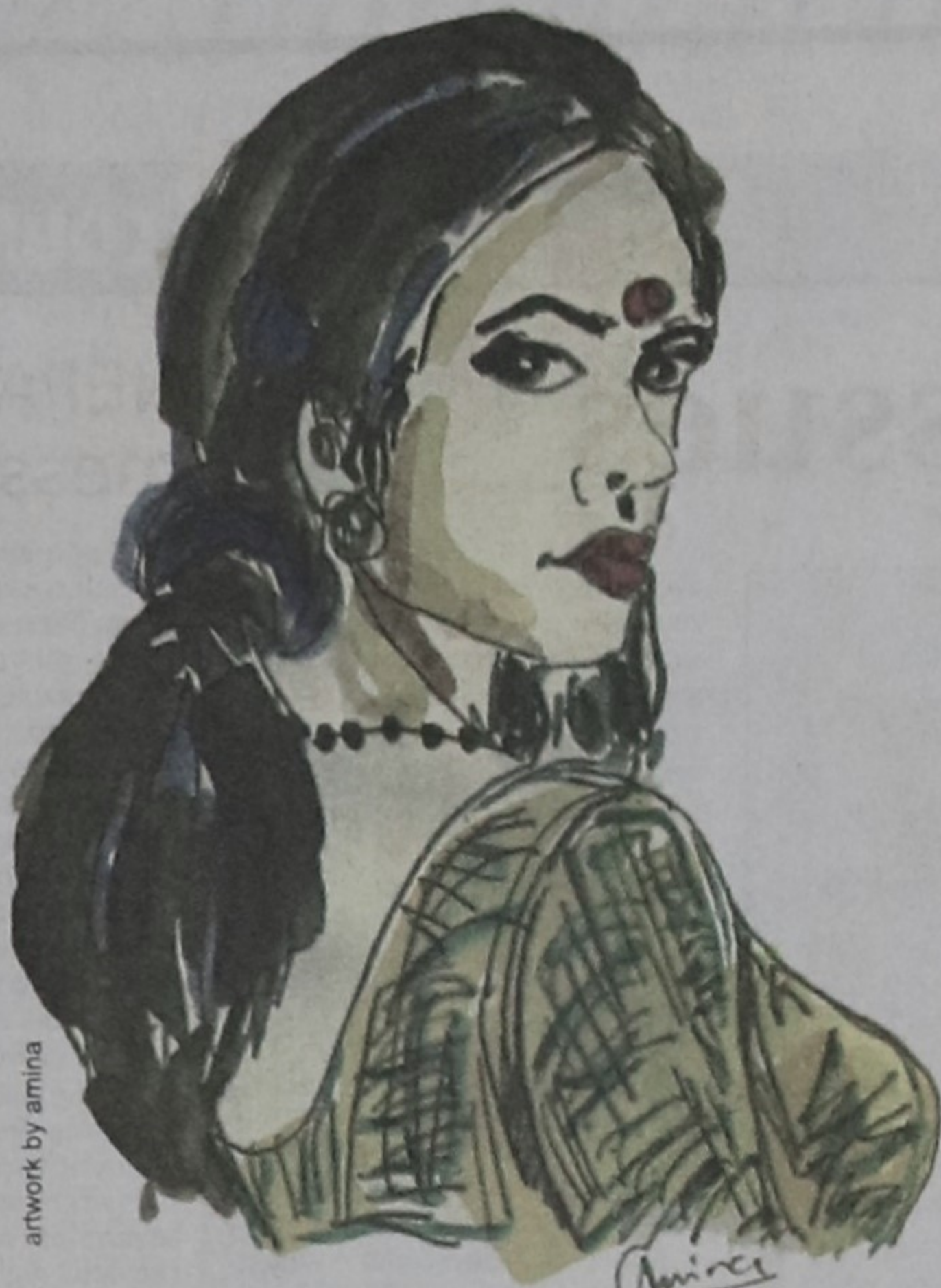
## SHORT STORY

## Demand and Supply

QUAZI MOSTAIN BILLAH

She sat on a bed covered with faded linen with huge blues roses printed on it. Uncertain of himself, he sat on a chair. The walls had the look of used white ceramic plates. A popular film tune played almost inaudibly, monotonously.

"You aren't sure, are you?"  
"Yes, I'm sure. I am hundred percent sure. I want the pure story."  
"But, I don't know whether I have a story. My life just follows the basic rules of demand and supply."  
"You don't understand. Each one of us has a story of life."  
"Don't be silly. How can my life have a story? I live the same life everyday. Stories begin and end. But my life had a beginning and I can't think that it will ever end. End means starvation, don't you see that?"  
The glass bangles clinked as she smoothed her kameez.  
"What do you mean?"  
"You are here because you gave me money. There will be many more after you, provided they also pay to get in here. It was the same yesterday. Hope, it will be the same tomorrow."  
"How many did you have yesterday?"  
Laughter waded through the room and bounced back from the walls.  
"Now, aren't you being naughty? *Dushtu chele*."  
"Yes, your charges are quite high."  
"Isn't it our duty to try to be at the top? But then you aren't a first-timer either. You shopped around."  
"Not really! I just wanted to meet the most highly priced one. The one at the top."  
Brows knitted.  
"Why?"  
"It's simple. I want to know the story of one who is in hot pursuit. That might help me to crack the mystery of your life."  
"But, there is no mystery here. It's just the law of demand and supply."  
"How so?"  
"Are you sure it's only talk that you want? You can be here only for an hour and part of your time is gone. You aren't frigid, are you?"  
A giggle sounded.  
"What is a frigid?"  
"You don't know that. Silly young man! Lots of people visit us to test their abilities. They want to be sure of their powers before they launch themselves into the trials of manhood. Human beings are strange and the fear that grips some of them is even stranger. Are you planning to get married?"  
"No, not yet. I have come to know the story of your life."  
"But I have told you that I don't have a story."  
The cawing of a crow invaded the room, disturbing its pale balance.  
"What did you say about drinking? I don't keep drinks. That often causes extra problem. If you want some, you have to go to a different place. I don't allow



artwork by amira

smoking in my room either."  
"What an unimaginative girl you are! Let's switch on to something else."  
"Have you checked how much time you have left?"  
"Why do you keep reminding me of the time?"  
"There will be no extension of the time. Even if you beg for it, there will be no concession. I don't like you and even if you increase your money I'll not let you stay in my room. I wish I could throw you out my room right now."  
"Why? What have I done?"  
"You talk too much."  
"In that case, why don't you give me what I am asking for? I will leave as soon as I have your story."  
"Haven't I already told you that I don't have any story of my life? It's just eating, drinking and living."  
"You are a clever woman."  
"I have to survive."  
"But shouldn't I get my money's worth?"  
An arch look.  
"Well, you have a strange understanding of the value of money."  
"That's my business. Why don't you give me what I want?"  
"But I'm not a story teller and no one comes here to listen to stories. We have our share of the miseries of life like the threat of eviction, attack of incurable

disease, beating by customers or severe handling by our keepers. But they do not make stories; they are the facts of life here."  
"You keep dodging the question. Let me be straight. How did you get into your business?"  
"I wish I remembered that. You don't think I keep a record of all the events of my life. I just live from day to day. The future has meaning for me as I would like to live tomorrow, day after tomorrow, even after that. But the past? That's dead and buried, for sure."  
A sigh breathed out of her light lips.  
"Where were you born?"  
Looked at the faded walls and then out through the curtained window.  
"I want to know where you were born exactly."  
"I am no country girl. Once, after eviction from one of my dens I hid in a village. I hated every second of it. No electricity, no running water."  
"So you are a city girl?"  
"Call me what you want. You must know that we are city born, city bred."  
"What city?"  
"Names do not matter for cities. They are all the same. What I remember is we were always moving from house to house. We lived like permanent flotsam surrounded by flotsam. What's there to remember about it?"  
"Which city?"  
"I remember one thing, though; the flotsam that we lived in was either beside huge drains or stood on waters that kept depositing city waste. Even weeds didn't grow in that water thick with excreta of the city. But that's not what I remember most."  
"What is it that you remember most?"  
"Hunger?"  
"Hunger!"  
"I remember hunger from my childhood."  
"Hunger!"  
"Yes, hunger. Hunger for chocolate, hunger for food, hunger for a toy, hunger for a new dress, hunger for what not. My mother used to shout saying that I was born with a furnace in my stomach. Whatever went in there would burn out instantly. Satisfaction of one hunger drove me to quench a quickly succeeding one. I often chuckle remembering that ever-flaming hunger. Were you ever hungry as a child?"  
"Well, children have their share of unusual hunger, but I don't remember anything special about it."  
"I think my hunger was a special one."  
"Now you are talking like a story teller."  
"Yes, I love to talk about hunger and its fulfillment. But it's not a story. The hunger I am talking of has always lived with me. It's all that I remember about my childhood."  
"Go on. You may eventually get to the story."  
"You see the hunger would not let me stay quietly at

home. Even as a toddler I would follow the *badamwala* or the *chanachur*-man or whoever would be around. Not that I had money always to buy nuts or ice cream from them. Where would I get money? It was easy to get love from my parents, but money was the hardest stuff to slip through their hands. Once in a while they would throw a coin or a taka at me, but such windfalls didn't happen everyday. I did buy whatever I could, but otherwise I had to depend on my luck. Sometimes out of swagger or pure pity the *badamwala* or the ice cream man would throw a nut or a chunk of ice cream at me. But my hunger would not be quenched; so I followed them like a hungry dog."  
"Like a dog?"  
"Why, haven't you ever seen a hungry dog sniffing garbage or running after people for food?"  
"Yes, a pitiful sight."  
"As I grew up, it became even harder to get the extra bite of *chanachur* or ice cream or *achar*. One might pity a child, but one won't be generous to grown ups. One day, it was very hot and my insides were burning. I had nothing to drink since morning. The roadside tap had dried up. Then I saw the ice cream man. Now and then he would place chunks of ice cream in my palms. I don't know whether he did it because it gave him a chance to touch me. I knew it was the time when he went by our shack on his third round. My eyes brightened, thinking he would scoop something out of his ice-box for me. The ice cream man looked at me intently. He came close and told me to follow him. He took me beside a tree around a point where the lane turned sharply. He asked me whether I was thirsty. With a finger inside my mouth, I said that my lips were burning dry. He touched them with his fingers and said that he could moisten them. When I asked him how, he suddenly lowered his face and kissed me hard. A kind of shiver ran down my body. I asked him why he did that but he said nothing. He looked around and was pleased to see that no one had seen us. With a full smile on his face, he gave me a whole ice cream with nuts on it."  
"Your first kiss in life was in exchange for an ice cream!"  
"Don't be funny. I was too young to understand this kissing fissing."  
"But suddenly my world began to broaden. There was a busy junction not far from where we lived. In the evenings, it looked like a fairland. On one side of the street a television with a huge screen had been mounted, which kept on showing pictures of models looking like fairy princesses. We devoured the pictures hungrily as rickshaws, buses, cars passed through the junction, as people moved in or out of the city. But what we really waited for were for traffic lights to blink red, when the stream of vehicles halted in the junction and we began our operation."  
"Operation?"  
"Yes, our begging sorties. We would usually move mainly from car to car to beg."  
"Go ahead."  
"As we ran from car to car, we varied our techniques. After all we had to soften the hearts of people to milk

them. It required talent. There were a few known techniques, such as carrying infants to evoke pity of the passengers. Every evening a few of us showed up there. Getting something from begging was our way of harvesting. It was fun. A spirit of competition worked in us. As soon as the lights went green and the traffic began moving, we would rush back to the pavements and check what we made. Some made a little, while others made almost nothing. The streets liberated me. Once evening came I had to get back there."  
"The street liberated you?"  
"Yes, I knew that there was no going back. But in the meantime I had made another discovery. I told you about the ice cream man."  
"Yes, you did."  
"After the first kiss there were many more and our mutual demands matched. He wanted to kiss me and I wanted ice creams."  
"A simple math."  
"Call it whatever you want, but very soon I discovered that there were many more things I could give and charge more for it. I realized that I was put advantageously on the supply side."  
"You began your present trade."  
"Don't be a simpleton. I told you at out the love for the street. One day, I had a serious fight with my mother. I had been fortunate on a particular evening. A woman riding a car had been very generous. Every evening I had to give an account of how much I made by begging in the street. I would hide bits of what I made to satisfy my hunger for this and that. But this time I needed more money than just to satisfy this or that. There was a dress that had caught my fancy and I wanted to buy it. I knew that I couldn't have that money at one go so I began saving, hiding money in a little tin can. But my mother found out my treasure and not only took whatever I had saved, but thrashed me for hiding things from her. In the meantime, the ice cream man had become more demanding."  
"What do you mean?"  
"Don't act stupid. You should understand. When he saw that I wasn't going to yield so easily, he proposed to marry me. He told me what a gorgeous life he could give me. He kept on pouring sweet dreams into my ears and I accepted his proposal after the beating."  
"You began a sweet life."  
"Yes, what a sweet life! After two miscarriages and regular beating for hundreds of disabilities I embraced the freedom of the street. Maybe, there's nothing here, but I have my freedom and I know there is demand for me."  
"So you got on the supply side?"  
"Mister, your time is up. However, you may come again. I liked chatting with you. But the trip will not be gratis. If you need a fresh supply you should be ready. You know in the big world it's all supply and demand."

Quazi Mostain Billah is professor of English at Chittagong University.

## TORONTO Journal

SAYEEDA JAIGIRDAR

Man is said to be a social animal, and sometimes he thrives best in his own peculiar social setting. Among Toronto's one million South Asian community is a thriving community of entrepreneurial folks from Bangladesh who have set up a bustling business scene and community space at Danforth, Toronto. "Little Bangladesh," as it is generically termed by Torontonians, is that stretch of road from Dawes road to Victoria Park Avenue where the entrepreneurial and social Bangladeshi spirit shines through.



Desh Pharmacy is always bustling with customers. Sometimes people just drop in to chat - this reminds one of the pharmacy shops near the old PG Hospital in Dhaka where half the people in the shops were just engaging in adda over a cup of tea.

On a given evening, strolling down Danforth, one spies grocery shops vying each other for the discerning Bangladeshi customer. There are Shahjalal and Marhaba stores (both owned by Sylhetis) that one can pop

It is Ramadan and one fancies a bit of Iftari (that someone else has cooked!) Where does one go? It is off to the Makkah Restaurant at Danforth. On entering, one is surrounded by the aromatic blend of cinnamon and lemon flavour that arises from a nearby pot of *haleem*. The owner of Makkah restaurant, Mr. Hakeem, a simple man who started his business in a very small way, comes up and asks us what we would like to eat today. We order the Iftari dishes such as *pakoras*, *chola*, and *haleem* knowing well that he will always add an extra dish for "special" customers! All of this is accompanied by fragrant cardamom spice tea and *gulabjamun*! Our appetites are satiated indeed!



Does one have a need for prescription medicine? Then it is off to Desh Pharmacy at Danforth. Mr. Konon started his business in 2006 and has not looked back since. It is thriving under the patronage of local Bangladeshis. They even have home deliveries that are made in record time. As Danforth is surrounded by apartment buildings with many Bangladeshi families, the



into if one fancies a crash course in the spoken dialect. Nestling side by side are the DVD shops and stores selling saris and shalwar kameezes. There is even a beauty parlor in the corner, but most of the Bangladeshi ladies confess that they prefer to go to a neighbour's "At-home-Parlor" to get their hair done, and have henna put on it. There are even the little coffee shops, which the local young men frequent for the *deshi* newspapers and adda over hot patties, cream rolls and hot sugary tea.

Besides these services, there are small businesses offering academic tutoring, and Quran classes for children, driving lessons, financial services, and brokerage and real estate consultancy.

There is also the Bangladeshi Canadian Community Services Association at Danforth, which is assisted by Canadian Government funding and has ran programs at Danforth to assist in the employment of new Bangladeshi immigrants as well as help families with domestic issues.

The harsh reality behind this bustle, this hub of activity, is the cold fact that many of these qualified immigrants did not find the jobs that they had once envisaged on immigrating and instead turned to small business and entrepreneurship to survive on an "unaccustomed earth". And in doing so, they have created a home away from home for themselves and for the local Bangladeshi-born immigrants.

Bengalis and culture are undeniably

entwined and so there are cultural functions such as *Pahela Boishakh* that are held yearly on the Danforth. The street is cordoned off and there is a magical transformation as Bangladeshi vendors set up colourful food stalls on either side of the mela and the evening air rings out with the voices of young artists singing *Boishakh* songs. At any given moment, on one of these occasions, as I looked across the sea of faces raised upwards, ears straining for the sounds of Tagore, I could not help but sense the quiet euphoria of this crowd as they listened to the sweet sounds of home far, far away from home.

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

## On Shahaduz Zaman

KHADEMUL ISLAM

*Ibrahim Buksh's Circus and Other Stories* by Shahaduz Zaman (translated by Sonia Amin), Dhaka: UPL, 2008.



Shahaduz Zaman is a Bengali writer, well regarded especially for his short stories. He has a doctorate in medical anthropology and teaches at BRAC University. He has written widely on the subject in both English and Bengali—I remember reading a Bengali daily's Eid issue where he published an engrossing ethnographic piece on our hospital culture. His dissertation and training has meant that a degree of native medical folklore and knowledge has seeped into his fiction, which has given them a texture and atmosphere unusual in Bengali short stories. In this collection of eight of his short stories in English translation being reviewed here, for instance, 'Clara Linden in Nijkolmohona' gives us examples of folk songs of midwives and those sung during pregnancy: *Tying knot upon knot, Come, read the secret behind the veil Add the name to the month of conception Divide by eight—and the future foretell If the remainder is one or three Then a baby boy it is sure to be. If the remainder be six, two, or four A baby girl will be born for sure. And if you should a zero behold A miscarriage is foretold!*

Not all of the stories, of course, are so distinctively marked by this specialized knowledge. 'The Story that Got Away' is about our 1971 liberation war, but with a twist, beginning with the writer pondering the hazards inherent in writing such a tale, and with the war narrative thus continually being broken up, interrupted, by authorial intrusions and turns and twists in the writer's imagination—an attempt to unveil the artistic process. Additionally, a surreal effect often results when a postmodernist narrative mode is applied to tales set not in urban areas or to

slices of 'modern' Bangladesh life, but to stories unraveling deep within its rural heart. Shahaduz Zaman may not be to everybody's taste, but as Syed Shamsul Haq has observed, at the very least he is attempting to wrench the Bangla short story free from its "moribund" conventions.

It can also lead him into dubious areas. In the story 'Paper Plane', a man on a bridge at night comes up to the narrator (unreliable, of course!) and says, "Listen, sir, Literature was not born the day a boy ran out screaming 'Wolf! Wolf!' with a huge brown creature in hot pursuit. It was born when that boy shouted 'Wolf! Wolf!' and there was no wolf at all!" The above is actually Nabokov's famous formulation about literature and the necessary duplicity of the artist. While the erudite reader of English literary criticism may recognize and resonate to the words, one has to wonder: What about average readers reading the story in the original Bangla, who are very likely unaware of the deeper reaches of Nabokov's conception of art and the creative process? What are they to make of it? If unexplained (and I don't have the original Bangla with me), then it's in danger of being merely an acquired pose, an affectation of deep thought. Or perhaps in postmodernism it doesn't matter, in which case the issue is moot...

Sonia Amin, who teaches history at Dhaka University, has made a resolute effort at translating these stories. The sincerity of her effort can be gauged from the fact that she went to the nettlesome bother of actually rhyming the song lines (as well as other ones) quoted above, succeeding to a surprising extent. She started "the enterprise" slowly, beginning with publishing a few translations in this literature page, then steadily accumulating them towards this book. It contains several previously unpublished stories, including "a quiet gem of a piece," Ibrahim Buksh's *Circus*, (which) reads like a novella. There are small lapses: different spelling of the same words ("fish monger" and "fishmonger," for example), or "knife wielding" not being hyphenated, or inappropriate capitalizations of words, but not enough to jar the reading. One hopes that in the future she'll attempt translations of more Bengali works and authors.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

## Bangladeshi-American

GULRUKH AKHTAR



In Tennessee beneath cantering horse clouds I crane by the pavement Flag a yellow taxi Hop inside to lean forward And honk in New Yoikese: "Drive me to Cox's Bazaar."

I have water on the brain!

I go to a softball party Tits in a sports bra Dance and smile Twirl and laugh Stand boozily by the veined hand Flipping hotdogs on a grill and hear: *Jokhon porbay na payer chinno ai baatay* Shower down from magnolia leaves.

My father would not approve!

I speak Americanese all day 'n night rat a tat clip clop wham bam zip zap In my sleep in red-white-blue dreams a man by a green-slimed pond leans into my eyes and whispers past cigarette smoke: *'Apni ki ashben na ghoray'*

I giggle: you makin' a pass at me man?

Gulrukh Akhtar studies film-making in Chicago.