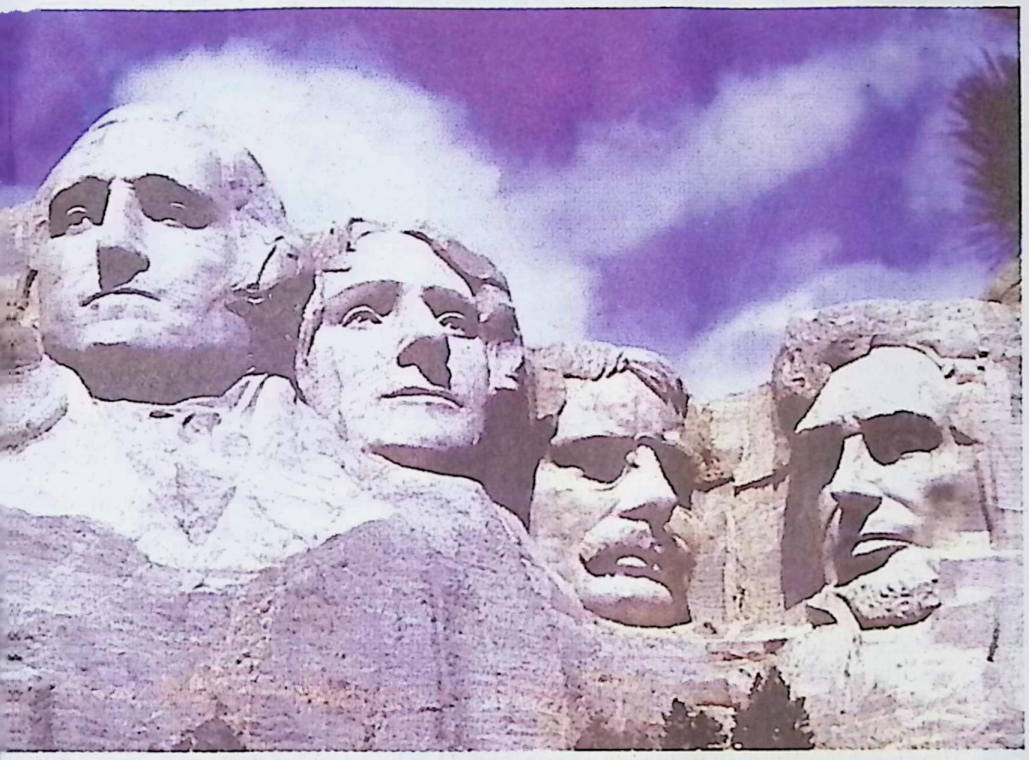
learn to appreciate mixed culture. If anything, living here can be confusing and strange for many Bengali families, eagerly seeking some sense of a rooted tradition, whether adopted or their own. I don't have an opinion for these people; nor do I have the need to celebrate such radically different cultural traditions. However, some people find joy in this mix-and-match aesthetic.



The vastness of America is disconcerting to me at times; our remoteness from one another makes it easy to get lost in one's ego. We often walk in a zombie-like state, totally oblivious of our surroundings. Through self-involvement, we are not able to share in the happiness of others or feel affected by their sorrows. All emotions become muted. I feel the utter selfishness of this society is the flip side of the coin of living in America. Such indifference and disconnect from others is something we all learn to accept reluctantly.

For people like me, from a distinctly different home country where I spent my first twenty formative years, America can fall short spiritually. There is no sense of living for intrigue or drama here.

I get the sense that being part of a community here can legitimise one's not returning home to Bangladesh. I think of a quote by Salman Rushdie: that my daughter used in her college essay several years ago, "There are people who don't belong...Anywhere. To anything, to anyone; comets travelling through space, staying free of all gravitational fields...but the only ones who see the picture are the ones who step out of frame." I wonder if I'm travelling through this land blissfully unaware that I do not belong to any place. Thirty years ago, did I cross what Rushdie describes as " a translucent membrane across the sky, between us and the last high road into the west, the unseen frontier"? Does it not matter to me that as long as I am breathing, it might as well be in any place on this earth?

Yet, why, while walking through America's colossal national parks do I sometimes spy, in the distance, a piece of land that resembles the little pasture where the cattle grazed in my ancestral home in the outskirts of Dhaka? Or why do I seek the smell of my mother's winter vegetable garden in a local organic store, while carefully picking out perfect red sun tomatoes (with a Product of Mexico sticker) or a nicely shaped tukan summer squash, straight from the vegetable patch of a Honduran farmer? Why do I have this prolonged pain that seeps through my heart and reaches to the very center of my being when I am taking a river cruise on the Potomac on a sunny summer afternoon? In my mind's eye, I am thinking of a far away memory: when I was a little girl, taking a boat ride in a wooden boat at dusk in the gentle breeze of the enchanting Shitalakhya River.

For me, it is undoubtedly the free spirit of Americans that attracts me most about this country. Here I can be totally alone and never feel abandoned while I take solitary long walks. It is this immense sense of being in control of your own individual self that is the most gratifying feeling for me. You do not have to follow any particular rules (as long as you are within the boundaries of law) in living your own life. I can make my own rules and pass them onto my immediate family without giving a mandatory explanation to the extended family, which is an unspoken requirement in Bangladesh. I am able to move freely between worlds. I am happy having fried fish at my dear old friend Runu's house (in the kitchen, a tape of Abdul Alim's heart rendering folk songs playing) where she still uses 'bothi' to clean fish, and gets her carefully packed Corell dishes out from the cabinet that she still calls 'almari' after twenty five years in America. I am equally happy having a grand feast at my sister's good missionary friend Charlotte Goslink's, at Christmas, sitting in their immaculate dining room with place settings, using Charlotte's mother's fine china from Belgium (Beethoven playing in the background and their happy dog BolaRam snoozing near the fireplace ). To be able to move freely in both worlds gives me an enormous sense of self, without changing my essence. I belong and I do not belong at the same time. I am still following this maze, so to speak, hoping to find a real answer for my being in the here and now. ■