

SHORT STORY

RASHID HAIDER  
(translated by Jamil Ahmed)

I could clearly see behind our house the ash heap beside which the huge date palm rose up into the sky, and in which the five *babui* bird nests swayed in the breeze. Even in the midst of such pain, I felt a joy on seeing them. We had entered into the country on December 6th. That day had been for our group a mix of intense sadness and laughter. At noon, before we left for our mission, Nawsher Bhai, our group leader, came running to breathlessly inform us, I've got some good news for you fellows.

We were then dividing into pre-operational small groups, but we left it to come at a dead run. Nawsher Bhai said, Today India is going to accord us recognition. Oh, what joy there was on hearing this news! And in the excitement of the moment when Malek of our group raised his rifle in the air and Bang! Bang! let loose a few shots our team leader turned on him angrily: You idiot! Don't you know what this can lead to?

It seemed as if Nawsher Bhai himself wanted to shoot Malek dead, but instead he kicked Malek, and the latter on being flung five feet away understood the gravity of the act he had committed. The strong Pakistani army base, roughly a mile and a quarter away, till then had been unaware of our presence. Our intention was to creep forward at noon, gradually surround them on all four sides and launch the attack at evening. A winter day, dusk by five o'clock. But all planning was ruined by those shots of joy by Malek. We lost four of our comrades, seven were seriously injured and a further twelve were lightly wounded. The sound of the shots had alerted the Pakistanis to our positions. And there was nothing else to do but accept the result--we had come here knowing we could die or be injured. Whether we lived or not was something we did not think about.

It was as if we lived without any thoughts of living. Even after so much had happened, seeing the *babui* bird nests gave us joy. It was on the crest of that joy that we pushed on towards home--though I knew nobody was home, that nobody *could* be home. Roughly seven months back, four days after I left home, I had heard that our village was still standing, and that there were even a few houses intact. But there were no people there. Everybody had fled. And though I knew there was nobody there of my family, yet even then that house seemed the best and sweetest place to be. Even if there was nothing else, at least my room would be there, the verandah and the yard, the well, and beneath the arch of the big tree, the thatch-roof kitchen.

I am surprised. They had not damaged the

At the Window\*



artwork by anyana

house at all. Though next door, Manu Uncle's house is not a house anymore, just the four charred stumps of its foundation, with blackened tin sheets and broken pots and pans scattered around. A dog among the livestock. I knew that dog well. It used to bark without cause. I saw it lift its head and take a good look at me. Dogs are supposed to follow at the heels of their masters. And though I was not its master yet I had expected its eyes to light up with a question: So you've come? It did not do so. It continued to lie curled up into a ball smelling the earth and soaking up the sunshine.

How astonishing that after I entered the house, I sat down after clearing my throat. Our home had at least five womenfolk: Mother, two sisters, the maid and my wife. Firoza. Before Firoza came, I would appear before the main door of the house and call out for Mother. My call changed after Firoza came. And one day my sister went ahead and said it--I didn't call for Mother as I used to before. Ashamed, from then on I would simply clear my throat to let them know that I was home. But today in this empty house who had I let know? The thought came momentarily, made me laugh, and then vanished. I went to the verandah adjoining my room and sat down.

My home, my room, all mine, yet looking at everything with new eyes I saw my boyhood running hither and thither across the yard, saw my mother on a winter night sitting by the stove cooking, the light from the fire lighting up her face, and then subsiding. Very clearly I saw Tamizuddin, Korban, Bazlu and Dildar go out the main door carrying my father's dead body, my mother falling on the floor of this verandah crying. Saw myself in

wedding clothes bringing into this home Firoza. How long had it been? Not even eight months.

What was I to do now? Where would I go in search of Mother, sisters and wife? Where had they gone, there was nobody in neighbouring homes that I could ask. How would I know who had fled where? I found out soon enough that I did not have the strength to walk; it was as if I never had the strength to walk anywhere. Though even yesterday when with rifle on my shoulder I had sometimes walked, sometimes run, and even forded a canal with the rifle held high above the water it had seemed as if the only way to rest my legs was to lie down with death. But now having sat down with a thud, I understood that the verandah was inviting my body to let go, saying lie down, lie down, this is your house and to have your meal and lie down in your own bed is why you trekked through jungle and forest and field, played with death in canals and streams with the hot sun and rain beating down on your head--now it's time you got some rest. But I kept thinking, where could they have gone. To my maternal grandfather's? But that was far from here, not less than thirty miles. Even more importantly, my grandfather's house nestled close to Chairman Yunus's house, a man to be feared even more than the Pakistan army. I had heard that he had saved his own daughter by handing over his brother's daughter to the army. And to hand over my sisters and wife to him would be no matter.

How surprising, the moment the thought entered my mind my legs regained all strength, my legs acted as a spur, that if I delayed even by a second I perhaps would miss Chairman Yunus, that he too was using

his legs to flee. In a trice I jumped up--only to hear as I stepped on to the yard: Going?

A silent village, a desolate neighbourhood, an empty home, amid which what woman's voice called out to me: Going?

For a minute I thought it must be the wind calling. I cocked my ears. And this time there was no mistake: Going?

Who is it? Who's calling?

Standing in my own yard I felt as if I was standing in some unknown place, as if I ought to flee immediately. With my voice sounding strange to my own ears, again I said: Who is it? Who's calling?

I am.

At once my eyes flew towards the window in Mother's room overlooking the verandah, where I was astonished to see Firoza's face. Her expressionless face, her two stone-cold eyes surveyed me. Instantly I forgot everything, Mother sisters this house all vanished; I went to the door of Mother's room screaming out loud her name only to see a big padlock swinging on the door. I rushed to the window. But to my shock Firoza stepped back and disappeared, and though I looked through the bars, behind it and to the sides, I could not see her.

Firoza! Firoza!

From inside the room's northern corner came the reply: Stand away from the window.

Why, Firoza, why?

I'm going to come to the window.

Why won't you come if I'm by the window?

That's why I won't come there.

Suddenly something burst inside me, and though I struck my head repeatedly against the thatch walls of the house Firoza still didn't come within range of my sight. In a calm voice she said, Step down into the yard. Firoza, Firoza, I didn't even dream of finding you, but why don't you come to me?

You step down into the yard.

Firoza, I'm your husband.

That's why you should be in the yard.

How strange! Haven't you come to me before, haven't you?

Step down into the yard.

Okay, Firoza. You see me like you do those others? We have seen each other's body, haven't we?

Firoza spoke even more calmly: Step down into the yard.

I felt like falling to the ground and crying out loud. I saw everything in the house as if in a mirror. Firoza's body was not only a mirror to me, I knew every inch of it, but even then she wouldn't appear before me, didn't want to show any of it except her face. Had she fallen prey to the Pakistan army?

Firoza, did the Pakistan army get you?

Yes.

When?

The day everybody fled the village.

So where are Mother, Raju and Shaju?

They managed to escape. Why couldn't you?

Because I thought I'd get caught.

So did you give yourself up?

No.

Making the air and sky tremble and weep, I said, Then it's not your fault. That's not your offence. You did not give yourself up, all over the country thousands of women have been defiled. I accept everything. Please come to the window.

Step down into the yard.

The blood rushed to my head. I aimed the rifle at the door and shot at the lock; it hit, but didn't blow it off. As the bullet ricocheted through the tin door and went inside the room Firoza said, Please don't shoot.

I'm going to blow the lock off and enter the room.

Then you won't find me.

Firoza, Firoza, what are you saying?

I'm going to stand in line with the lock.

Meaning?

So the bullet hits me after coming through the door.

I couldn't think of what else to do. Should I use the rifle butt to break the lock? When I desperately began to hit the lock with the rifle butt, from the other side Firoza said, I told you, if you see me you won't get me, will never get me. Please step down into the yard.

In a pleading voice I asked, But Firoza,

what is my fault?

You are not at fault. Believe me, you're my pride.

So why aren't you coming to the window?

Step down into the yard.

Firoza's direction sounds like an oracle to me. Like a man hypnotized I step into the yard and call out in a subdued voice: Firoza, I'm your husband.

I know.

So why won't you come before me?

In an unnaturally calm voice Firoza replied:

I can't.

Suddenly the thought flashed through my mind, were there no clothes covering her body?

You, are you not covered?

Yes.

But what's the problem? I'm your husband. I'm now in the yard.

I saw that Firoza's face had appeared in the window. Again, like a man hypnotized, I called out: Firoza!

In a voice calm as the sky, Firoza merely answered, I can see you in full. Whatever you can see of me, see that only.

\*Slightly abridged for publication.  
Rashid Haider is a Bangladeshi writer. Jamil Ahmed lives in the UK.

Victory Day in Calcutta\*

Translated by MOBARAK ALI

After the news reached Calcutta of Dhaka's surrender there began victory celebrations. Thousands of people congregated at Theatre Road (where was housed the Provisional Government of Bangladesh). Spontaneous victory parades and marches came out joyously on roads and streets. Various leading figures and luminaries of West Bengal political parties, cultural and social organizations rushed over to Theatre Road to congratulate the leaders of the Provisional Government. During the whole nine months of the war the area of Theatre Road had been a security zone. Tajuddin's status had been like that of a secret refugee. But with the announcement of the fall of Dhaka, this secretiveness melted away in a flood of joy and celebration. Standing on the upper-storey verandah of the house at No. 8 Theater Road, Syed Nazrul Islam and Tajuddin Ahmed acknowledged the congratulations and gave thanks to a jubilant crowd by waving their hands. Calcutta's journalists and foreign correspondents jammed at Theatre Road. Sunlight sparkled on the whole area: A light that spread throughout the whole world--the joyous news of the liberation of a nation.

At Theatre Road there convened an emergency meeting of the cabinet members of the Provisional Government. Directives about the institutional and governmental reconstruction began to be transmitted to a free Bangladesh. After Jessore had been liberated on 7 December, 19 Zilla Administrators had been appointed in the country's 19 free zillas. The government had completely collapsed. Banks had been closed from 3rd December onwards. Factories and post offices had stopped functioning. The directives were being broadcast over Swadhin Bangla Betar, which was also being helped in this task by Akash Barta Calcutta. The fear of the Provisional Government was that Bengalis, having undergone war and oppression for nine months, had hatred in their hearts, and if this hatred turned into a bloodlust for revenge then the consequences could be severe--foreign states would not grant recognition to the new government was the chief concern. The Provisional Government had decided on the modalities of war crimes trials of Pakistani soldiers. Clear orders were issued to the Mukti Bahini to be on maximum alert against all those



inclined to take the law into their hands. The Provisional Government was further worried about another development. Youths were now roaming in Dhaka armed with Chinese rifles. After surrendering the Pakistani army had abandoned these weapons hastily. Besides the guns of the 84,000 regular guerrillas of the Mukti Bahini and the 10,000 members of the Mujib Bahini, the irregular bands of guerrillas who were now inside the country were also armed. And then there were arms in the hands of the collaborators of the Pakistan Army, the Razakars, who numbered between 60- to 70,000. Towards the end of the war, the Pakistan Army had freely distributed arms among them. Until these arms were recovered Dhaka could not be declared safe. The Provisional Government wanted to return posthaste to Dhaka, but the Indians had informed them that until full military control had been established in the city it would not be safe for the members of the Provisional Government to proceed there. If the situation improved in three or four days then the cabinet members would be flown there. On 18th December a group of Awami League officers from the Calcutta secretariat were flown to Dhaka. Several more were sent on the 19th. These officers, upon their arrival in war-torn Dhaka, immediately set about their task after setting up office in the central Secretariat building...

Translated from Ekatturyar Kolkata by Fazlul Bari (Dhaka: Agami Prokashoni, 1993). Mobarak Ali is a schoolteacher.

Kali O Kolom Poush 1415 -- December 2008

KHOKON IMAM

The present volume of *Kali O Kolom* began on an interesting note with the lead article by Sanatkumar Saha being on three celebrated English-language novels by Bangladeshis who were deemed by him to be probashis in various degrees: Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Abid Ali's *Seasonal Adjustments* and Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*. However, midway through the piece, the reviewer brought in a poetry volume of a Ms. Seema Nusrat Amin, *Bootsle Unbound* (Dhaka: OUP, 2005), which he then proceeded to discuss in the same terms as the other three. The inclusion of this volume and poet within this particular discussion was incomprehensible--in no way is it comparable with the other three. The sample lines of poetry from the book reinforced the above thought in no small measure: "...you, slim-twiggd lavender birch/thrashed but rooted in the yellow sorrow/with you I have passed, these desert stars' harrow..." It immediately and conclusively rendered suspect the reviewer's ability to deliver credible critical assessment of South Asian English fiction. It also brings into question *Kali O Kolom*'s reviewing of English language fiction--its reviewers must be vetted for English language fluency, and knowledge of English language fiction, before being tasked with such assessments.

The rest of the journal has scrupulously kept to its high standards. One of the pleasures of this volume is in observing the slow comeback of poet Shahid Quadri from his long silence. There is not only a poem by him (published in translation here) but also an interview by Adnan Syed, where the poet shows that while the body may be enfeebled the spirit is alive and well, and that he has lost none of his old verve for literary adda. Among the short stories two stand out in terms of freshness of purpose and writing--*Poshak* by Mahbub Talukdar, and *Shonkho Shikol* by Rafiqur Rashid. Here it must be mentioned that *Kali O Kolom* has done itself and its readers a huge favour by expanding its inside artwork roster--pointed out in a previous review--to include Rafiqunnabi and Monirul Islam (along with standard ones by the ever delightful Ranajit Das and the sylvan lines of Rokeya Sultana). The difference in terms of re-invention and overall look is obvious. May the magazine continue on its path of artistic diversity!

Speaking of art, there is an unusual piece on graffiti art--that of Banksy in London--by Abul Mansur, which begins by pondering the question: In Bengali should we term it as '*poth shilpa*', '*deyal chobi*', or '*unmukto aakibuki*'? *Kali O Kolom* is doing a signal contribution to Bengali art criticism and nonfiction writing in general by pushing the boundaries of Bengali writing and prose, and no doubt here thanks are due in large measure to its discerning editor Abul Hasnat. There are reviews of art exhibitions: one of Monirul Islam at Bengal Gallery, and the other at Drik Gallery of pot painter Raghunath Chakravarty. I had the good luck to catch both exhibitions, and can say that both reviews do ample justice to two fine exhibitions.

Among the other pieces there is a write-up on ex-National Professor Razzaque of Dhaka University, an iconic figure who in his day was a vivid link to a bygone era of Bengali Muslim society. Though Mofidul Haq's piece refreshes memories, the article lacks real depth--the intertwining of man and legend here is too strained for any real portrait to emerge. There is an excellent translation of the Chinese writer Mo Shen's 'The Window', but as has happened before with such efforts, the journal fails to inform its readers whether the Bengali translation is of an English translation of the original Chinese. It is a practice it must eschew. The drama review takes a look at Adivasi theater, while among the book reviews at the end, two in particular (Sohrab Hasan on Hasnat Abdul Hye's *Comrade Anu'r Oporanno*, and Sarkar Abdul Mannan on Hayat Mamud's *Probandho Shongroho*) are thoughtful and well-judged.

The cover art is an oil done in 1990 is by senior artist Shafiuddin Ahmed. He was born in 1922, and was a contemporary of Shilpa Acharya Zainul Abedin. He is well known for his etchings and drawings on the 1971 War of Liberation.

Khokon Imam works for a Dhaka-based NGO.

That Time

SHAHID QUADRI  
(Translated by Khademul Islam)

Srabon wrote its  
Story on your body  
--that taste I haven't forgotten

Avoiding the eyes of enemy soldiers  
You came  
Crossing three streets  
Wet from the rain  
--I haven't forgotten

The time was of war  
Curfew on all sides  
We by joining the pack  
Of fools, idiots and jesters  
Instead of heeding the  
Message of knowing ones  
Took up arms  
--I haven't forgotten

Grief and sound-wracked  
Came independence, peace,  
Came war-ending fatigue  
Didn't I then  
Tell you, "*Apsara*"  
"Only your belongings  
"Your face's grace  
And yet you evaded my grasp  
--I haven't forgotten.

\*In Hindu mythology a celestial nymph.  
Shahid Quadri lives in New York.

Cloud Messenger

SAMAR SEN  
(translated by Khademul Islam)

In the neighbouring home  
A girl sings a song of forgetfulness,  
The tired tune  
Floats in the air like a fallen leaf  
And fires flare up once in a while  
In the forest of the dark sky.

The rains before the storm, afterwards the flood.  
When the waters will sweep away homes,  
There will float mute animals and garrulous people,  
And in the city's streets  
Will rise the plaintive cry of the famine's volunteers,  
In your mind will arise the joy of coming together  
As you turn towards to your married lover.  
You, pale girl, what joy do you get from love,  
What delight is there in bearing children?

artwork by anyana

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.