

## NON-FICTION

## Faking It

KHADEMUL ISLAM

"Them game wardens frown, really frown, if you put feed on the wooter to git the birds," Cody informed me conversationally. We were outside West Ocean City, driving through reed-covered wetlands towards St Michael's river. Like all Eastern Shore natives he said 'wooter' instead of 'water'. So did Jeanne, his sister. It was a December morning, bitterly cold, yet the windows on the Ford pickup were down. The wind whipped at my face, blistering it. I tried not to show the pain - I didn't want Cody to change his mind at the last minute about taking a city boy hunting.

"Yeah?" I said.  
"Yeah," he replied, turning into a lane flanked by winter-bare loblolly pines. At its end was a small clapboard house. Jim, his younger brother, was waiting in the front yard, smoking Marlboros and throwing sticks for his black Lab, Scooter, to fetch. He, like Cody, had on thick jeans, yellow workman's boots and sheepskin-lined Levi's jacket. "Hey," Jim said as he slid in beside me. Scooter jumped into the back of the truck with practiced ease.

"Hey," I answered. Cody revved the truck back on the road. Jim sat smoking, gazing out at the flat marshland dotted with glinting water surfaces. The wind lashed at his face. He didn't seem to notice.

We were going to check on the 'duck blind'. Tomorrow I was going goose hunting.

I had met Jeanne in a small sports bar off Connecticut Avenue in Washington DC. On the weekends I would join the regulars to watch football. American football, that is, to whose lure I had finally succumbed. It had edged me into drinking beer, something I had steered clear of these past years. But there was no getting around it now, not if I wanted to watch football with the guys in a neighborhood bar.

One day a green-eyed blonde sitting next to me turned and said, "Is that a Cincinnati cap you're wearing?"

"Yup. Plain as day."

"No kidding."

Her name was Jeanne. "I didn't think anybody rooted for Cincinnati outside of Ohio," she said wonderingly. The Cincinnati Bengals had been on a losing streak for the last decade, and was the butt of jokes everywhere. I was losing bets with Mike, one of the regulars, who was mockingly starting to quote Yogi Berra: "It's getting late early out there."

"It's just a rough patch. We'll be back," I said in my best Terminator voice.

She laughed at that one. "Haven't seen you here before," I said.

"I'm new to town. From Ocean City, on the Eastern Shore."

"I see," I replied, not seeing at all. I was hazy about what lay on the other side of the



Chesapeake Bay.  
"And you?"  
"From Bangladesh."  
"Huh?"  
And so it went, the whole nine-yard bit: where Bangladesh was, how it was home to the Royal Bengal tiger, and which was how I'd become a Bengals fan, for the orange tiger stripes of its team colors.

"Well, I never... a Bengals fan from Bangladesh!"  
She was a court reporter up on the Hill, worked in DC five days of the week, and went home to her boyfriend, a carpenter, on the Eastern Shore for the weekends.

"Know what," she finally said, "you oughta meet my parents. They'll love ya, they're always going to places like China, or the... the... the Silk Route, is that it, for their vacations, and they can never find anybody in Ocean City to talk to about it."

That was how I got acquainted with Maryland's Eastern Shore. Jeanne and I would head due east from the Beltway, and get on Highway 50. We would stop in Annapolis for crab cakes, cross the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, drive through sleepy counties named Talbot or Dorchester till we reached West Ocean City at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. Ocean City was farther out on the sea, atop a strip of barrier reef. We would cross a little bridge to get to it, to the pounding surf and tearing wind of its beach and boardwalk.

I became fast friends with Jeanne's parents, George and Suzanne. At our first meeting George asked me if I'd ever had a Manhattan. He was a tall, wiry figure, deeply tanned from

a lifetime out in the sun. He was on the city council and built houses for a living, which on the Eastern Shore meant he worked harder than the dozen men he employed in his construction company.

"No," I said.

"How long you been in the States?"

"Ten, eleven years."

"Well, 'bout time you had one." He fished out a huge highball glass with a sailboat etched on it from the freezer, and made Manhattans in it with Canadian Club whiskey and sweet vermouth. After a month of this I went one up on them, toting along Sazerac rye whiskey on my trips. "Canadian Club and maraschino cherries, that's not Manhattans," I lectured them. "During Prohibition they had to make do with Canadian whiskey and that's how those guys got into the act. You want r-e-e-a-l Manhattans, you gotta use Kentucky hunder-proof rye."

George and Sue chuckled and drank their CC Manhattans anyway. They knew I'd gotten that from some book. I'd bunk in the topmost room with the picture window and wake up mornings to sunlight crashing around me, then go down for boardwalk hash browns and eggs overeasy. Seagulls cresting waves. Oysters and siestas. Four months later I was even sliding into Eastern Shore speech. I would say 'git' instead of 'get' while over there, and note that their grandson, Sam, had "put r-e-e-a-l hurtin' on the pizza."

It made George and Sue chuckle even harder. But try as I might, I could never bring myself to say 'wooter' - it'd always come out as 'water.' I'd never be an Eastern Shore good ole boy. I was faking it.

Within six months I was family. George had bought an old house on Hurley's Neck back of the Nanticoke river, on a sprawl of seventeen acres, and it was marvelous for a Bong like me, brought up to disdain manual labor, to see how he transformed it, with lumber, nails, power drills, hammers and saws, strippers, paint thinners, paint and carpeting, into a thing of balance and finish. And at night, with the sky a dazzling dome of stars, I'd see quick red foxes run in the beam of torches.

Saturday nights George would take us out for steaks and shrimp at the Surf 'N Turf. One time Cody yawned and let slip that hunting season was about to open and he had to "git me some gus" - 'gus' was how he said 'goose.'

I perked up. "You mean take Joes out on shoots?" The Eastern Shore was smack dab in the middle of the Atlantic Flyway (the East Coast winter migratory route of ducks and geese flying from the frozen north to the warm south), and hunts organized by locals for outsiders was an industry. Ocean City itself, aside from being a tourist-beach town, was also a primo marlin fishing spot, with charter boats hauling well-heeled types out for deep-sea battles.

"Nope," Cody replied, nodding towards his three boys chowing down like there was no tomorrow. "To put food on the table, we eat gus during huntin' season."

"You ever hunt?" George asked. I said, well, sort of, couple of times. My father had taken his 12-bore shotgun on a road trip from a town called Chittagong to a beach named Cox's Bazar, missing snipes and herons by a mile. There also had been some odd ducks in a place called Sylhet. But an honest-to-goodness hunt, nope.

"Do I git to go?" I asked Cody afterwards.

"No way," he said. "You bein' a fool Bengals fan and all..."

We stood at the edge of a vast lake. Scooter ran around sniffing, his coat glossy, as a stiff breeze ruffled the water. We craned our necks at the sky looking for geese. After about ten minutes Jim said he saw some. I couldn't. Cody spotted them too. Jim pointed out a patch of sky, and though I looked and looked I couldn't see them. Only after five more minutes of eye-straining did I see some specks in the western sky, seemingly miles away. It was a marvel how Jim had picked them out. We checked the duck blind, a wooden stand cunningly concealed among the tall grass on the water, to see if it stood firm and the lines of fire were clear.

The next morning we set out in the pre-dawn dark. It was godawful cold. Even Scooter was sniffing in the back. I shivered beneath my heavy lumberman's woolen shirt, though for once the windows were rolled up. The three of us washed down sandwiches with

coffee as the ghostly countryside drifted past, in clumps of grey. At the lake we parked the truck at a distance, unloaded the shotguns and duck decoys swiftly, and sloshed over in our waders to the blind. A few days back I had been given a crash course in the 12-gauge Remington 870, which took getting used to because of the American-style pump action to eject an empty shell casing and chamber in a new one. We floated the decoys on the water and hunkered down in the blind, with a wispy line of light showing in the sky. Scooter lay tautly beside me. Cody and Jim checked, and re-checked, the guns, draining the last of the coffee. Jim stood up to look for geese.

"I see 'em," he said after some time.  
Cody and I stood up. Faint in the distance, was a small flock of geese. They seemed very high up. "Jesus, they're way too high," I muttered.

"Not to worry," Cody said. We crouched down, and peered up through the grass. The geese flew in closer, then closer still, as Jim took out a reed blower and startlingly, loudly, began to make geese calls - a series of short honks and moans. They sounded amazingly real, carrying clearly in the still air. Scooter lay motionless, his nose quivering. Suddenly the geese were above us, honking back, circling. As I looked on, they did what looked like a flip and glided downward in one swift skimming motion. Just as they closed in beside the decoys, Cody and Jim stood up and fired. They were incredibly fast, aiming, shooting, pumping out the spent cartridge, pivoting with the startled, wildly veering geese, and firing again. Four geese, one after the other, toppled into the water. Even with two guns blasting at such close quarters, Scooter never even twitched. As soon as the first one hit the water, he dove in. I was still crouching when he brought it in. A Canadian goose, all plump body and pearl-grey down. With workmanlike efficiency Scooter deposited it, and turned back to get the others, swimming with hardly any splash.

Later they bagged two more, while I never even got to raise my gun. Six fat birds in the back of the pickup for the trip home, with Scooter nestling among them. That afternoon, thoroughly basted, one slid straight into Sue's oven, a goose roast to accompany the evening Manhattans...

"George," I remarked later, "those puppies were too fast for me. Damn."

"That's cuz," Cody said, "you ain't a r-e-e-a-l redneck."

In the ensuing hoots of laughter nobody heard my protests...only Scooter cocked a sympathetic head at me. "Good doggie," I said as I patted him.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

## Kali O Kolom: Magh 1415 - January 2009

KHOKON IMAM

This beginning-of-the-new-year issue of *Kali O Kolom* is justly an invigorating one, a sentiment that is echoed by Ashrifa K Nova of Tejgaon, Dhaka, writing in her letter to the editor that readers expecting to encounter something new in the pages of *Kali O Kolom* are seldom disappointed. The two opening articles, in a sort of contrast of two quite different authorial temperament and style, are on Syed Waliullah and Buddhadev Bose, with the former focusing on the writer's short stories while the latter one discusses Bose's modernism.



Harishankar Jaldash contributes an engrossing piece on Ghanashyam Choudhury's book *Obogahon* in the context of the humanism that began to be apparent in Bengali literature from the activities of the circle of writers and thinkers that included DeRozio-Ram Mohan Roy-Vidyasagar-Madhushudhan-Bankimchandra-Rabindranath, with their natural sympathy for the underdogs and untouchables in a deeply caste-ridden society. The novel's action centers around the Naxalite movement in the year 1977, and Ghanashyam was awarded the 2001 Ramananda Chattapadhyaya Memorial Award for it. Among the short stories in this volume two, 'Baba'r Chobi' by Zafar Talukdar and 'Hijack' by Sudarsan Saha, are notable, with Saha's story being accompanied by the fluid lines of Ranajit Das, which seem perfectly adapted for magazine illustrative purposes. Syed Manzoorul Islam has written a graceful piece on the playwright, Nobel Prize winner and conscientious soul Harold Pinter, discussing three of his most celebrated plays within the context of having to teach them in class at Dhaka University. The poets published in this issue of *Kali O Kolom* are Rafiq Azad, Hayat Saif, Titas Chowdhury, Iqbal Aziz, Shafiq Alam Mehdi, Tapan Goswami, Kamal Mahmood, Nazmul Hayat, Saifullah M Dulal and Jahangir Islam. Without a doubt, however, the most outstanding piece in this issue is a translation of American writer Grace Paley's 'A Conversation With My Father' by Rifat Munim. Grace Paley was born of Russian-Jewish immigrants, studied with Auden in New York, and tenaciously held on to her socialist beliefs till the last. It is an inspired choice for translation, for it introduces to Bengali readers a genuine American voice, somebody who was far from the current crop of 'celebrity' writers continuing to give American letters a bad name. Here one has to fully commend Editor Abul Hasnat on this choice. The other very readable piece is on Cavafy, the Greek poet who paid lifelong homage to the city of Alexandria, amid personal and familial decline in fortunes. It is accompanied by Bengali translations of his poems; the translations read very well, furthering the popular notion that Cavafy is one of those rare poets who holds up well in another language.

There are in addition theatre and book reviews, a look at Rafiq Azad, one of Bangladesh' bright lights in the world of architecture, plus a lively account of a film festival in Bubhaneswar by Shabnam Ferdousi. There is also an interview of artist Paritosh Sen, who reveals himself to be a reader of Jhumpa Lahiri and Arundhati Roy. Finally, this review would be remiss if it did not mention the striking cover painting, another felicitous choice, titled *Grissler Dupur* (Summer Noon) by noted artist and present dean of the Institute of Fine Arts Rafiqunnabi. Who in past issues has also proved to be no mean hand with the pen. Or keyboard, as the case may be.

Khokon Imam works for a Dhaka NGO.

## Two Poems by Ruby Rahman

(translated by Farid Rahman)

### A Patched-Up Poem

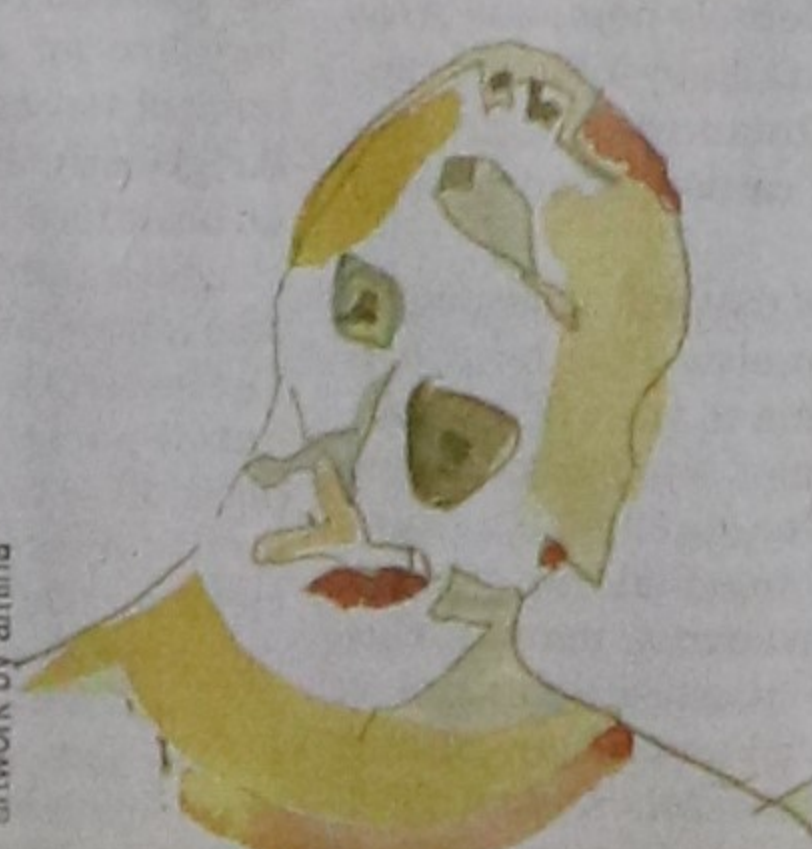
You must have realized by now  
That this poem, like life, is all patched-up.  
Two lines were written in the month of Agrayayon  
Over which swept innumerable Sidrs, so many springs.  
Haggling over fish  
I jotted down two more lines on a taka note.  
Then came inflation, came famine,  
Who knows where flew away that taka note  
Flew away this surreal life  
Flew away all those open dreams.

That night amid a gentle earthquake  
When trembled this new century  
The trees flew up to somehow go and sit  
Beside the stars in the sky,  
Clouds rushed in at comet-speed to fill my rice plate,  
And I was flung to land in Palashi's battlefield.  
From the earth's depths out flowed boiling lava  
My little finger and forefinger jerked  
As my tears and blood burnt to vapour.  
My Srabon nights misted, they fled away  
Fled the blue deep-dark clouds, dried the ceaseless rain.  
Yet, even then,  
Astonishingly blue-and-green alphabets crowded me  
To sew these lovely patches like a quilt  
On the body of my poem.

Only to again disappear. What desolation!  
On fields open spaces in offices rush working people  
Aging faster than sound, faster than light.

In this tumult  
Two stanzas of this poem enter into a black  
hole  
But every moment send distress signals  
Blip-blip from the center of dreams, from the depths  
of a re-awakening  
As if a star was emerging from within Srabon-darkness!  
In this poem like desolate life where do I fit in the lines!

Oh, this patch-work, this tailorwork I can no longer abide



artwork by amina

### Quarreling

The quarrelling's been going on, you couldn't stay home  
The price of onions too high so you didn't buy them  
Flowers bloom in the grass at Curzon Hall  
(Rabindranath, I'm in debt to you...). It's February, yes, I know,  
Seminars, the book fair, final proofs—I know you forgot it all  
Donned that ancient yellow *punjabi* and stalked out—  
I know, Bazlu bhai's on his last journey at the Shahid Minar  
And flowers bloom in glens. Yet insidiously I carry on the quarrel  
Though life's two-score years have long since gone by—  
Well, all right, we shall meet the year round at the bookfair  
And flowers will bloom as Falgun falls  
And maybe in a second life I'll get some peace and quiet.

Clad in that yellow *punjabi* out you stormed  
The day went in bickering, love sprouted among the flowers  
On this squabbling-cum-moonlit spring night I saw in a dream  
You placed a tiara on my head—oh the  
Agony the vision brought—the torment  
You searched and couldn't find your heart  
So you placed on high your anguish,  
In pain I staggered and understood  
This was not gold, but a drop of ambrosia.

Ruby Rahman is a well-known Bangladeshi poet. Farid Rahman is a translator and writer.

### Trees A Prose Poem

Kaiser Haq

Surely you've noticed how, as soon as you get out of the city, the sight of trees and greenery lifts up the spirits, even to the point of elation. The reason for this, I'm certain, has to do with evolutionary psychology. Our mind is essentially the same as that of our earliest ancestors on the African savanna, where foliage meant food to pluck or trap or hunt. Plants and trees and grassland, so to speak, meant both nature and nurture.

I wonder if our evolutionary connection with vegetation goes deeper still. Is it too fanciful to imagine that trees inspired our evolution into two-legged homo sapiens sapiens? I can see our almost-human predecessors staring awe-struck at the vertical rise of tree-trunks, topped by varied and quite fantastic hairstyles, and then pushing off the earth with their forefeet in an attempt to stand shoulder to shoulder with them. Needless to say, those who succeed reach out with their hands to pluck the appetizing fruit nestling amidst the boughs. The rest is Darwinian commonsense.

Later, when mankind had found their best friend in the dog, the dutiful canine quadruped, like an ideal slave, identified completely with the master, to the extent of trying to emulate the tree-like stance. Alas, it could only manage to make a tripod of itself. The poor creature's frustration and resentment settled into a subliminal layer of its psyche to obtain pleasing release each time it raised a rear leg to deluge the roots of a tree.

Kaiser Haq's *Collected Poems 1968-2008*. Published in the Streets of Dhaka is available in

