

SHORT STORY

Birds

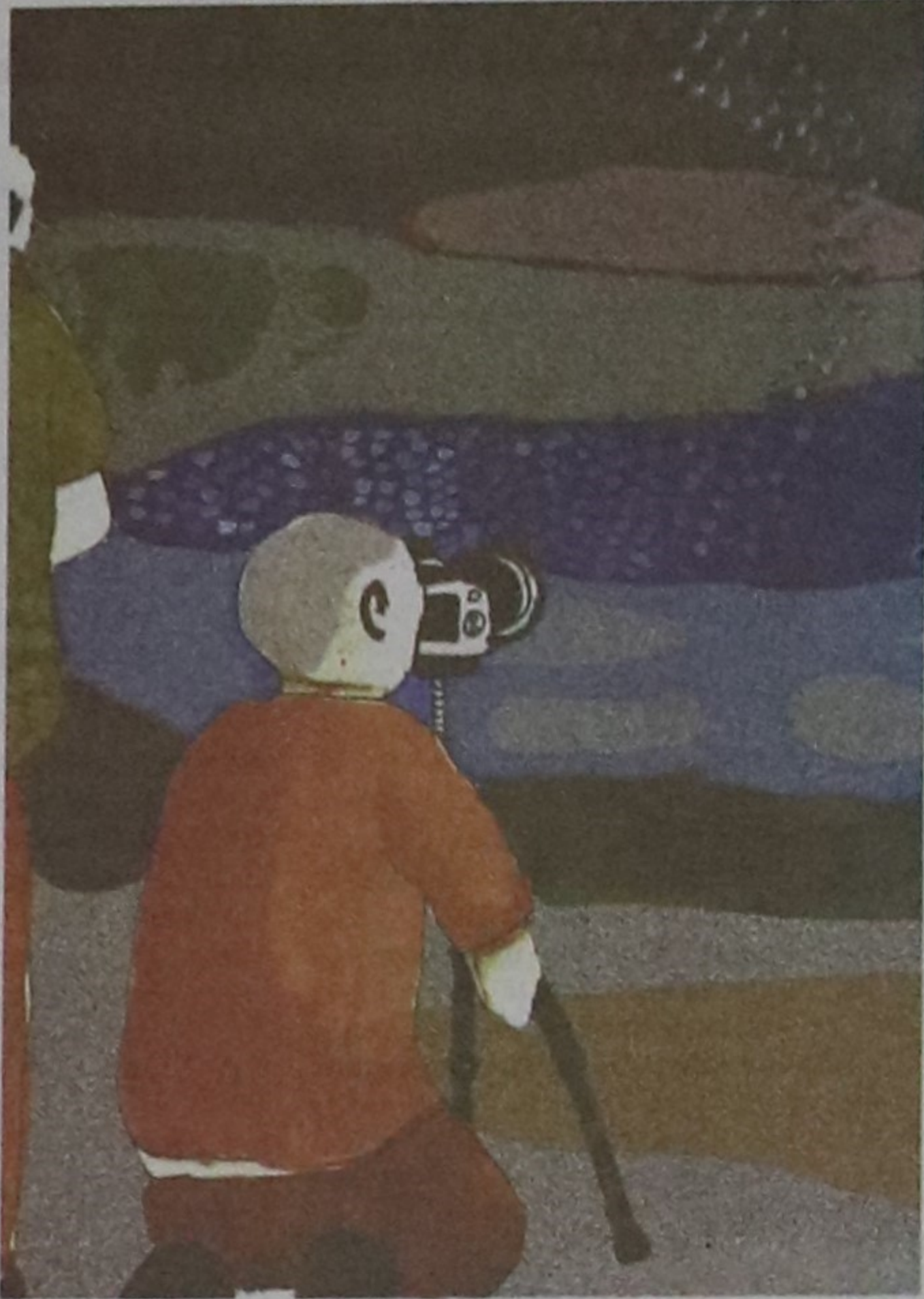
MASHIUL ALAM
(Translated by Hasan Ferdous)

Koshkin called me on the morning of 3 December. Koshkin, that is Andrei Pavlovich Koshkin, is a young diplomat at Dhaka's Russian Embassy. I had met him in Moscow where I once lived as a university student. I have returned home some five years now. These past years I have had no contact with him, until last year when we unexpectedly met at an international conference in Dhaka. I learned that he had been reassigned here from New Delhi only the previous month. We soon renewed our old friendship and spiced it up with vodka. These days we see each other once in a while, and speak quite often over the phone. Each time he goes home, he returns with a bottle of vodka for me. There are days when we also eat out at restaurants.

Koshkin, whom I call Andrei, is crazy about birds. In fact, not just birds; he has a deep curiosity and love for all kinds of animals. His hobby is taking pictures of birds and animals. He has an expensive camera fitted with large lenses. Koshkin has traveled to many countries to take pictures of birds and animals. On the 3rd of December morning, he told me, "My dear friend, winter birds have arrived. I want to see them, let's go."

So we went out together. Andrei himself drove from Gulshan to East Raja Bazaar to pick me up. Inside his air conditioned car, with his stereo playing music by Alla Pugacheva, it felt like early spring in Moscow. Andrei offered me potato chips and Heineken beer.

Forty minutes later we arrived in Savar and stopped next to a chor a sliver of sandy land rising out of a dying river - by the road. At the end of the sandy strip stood a swamp, which was somewhere between a river and a bayou. Beyond the swamp, amidst the morning fog, there lay faint dark lines of a village. Soon the sun rose with all its glow; its crimson light spread out all over the marsh, slowly replacing a misty blanket that lay over it.



artwork by wasim hela

I asked Andrei, "What about the birds, where are they?"

Andrei smiled. Pointing a finger in one direction, he said, "There, right there. So many of them, can't you see them?"

From a distance, the birds looked somewhat like a mass of water hyacinth or lotus floating over the water below.

Andrei smiled again, "Yes, those are birds."

Now it was my turn to be surprised. Never in my life had I seen so many birds in one place. I had no idea that so many birds could actually flock together to cover an entire body of water. We left our car near the sandy strip and walked closer to the swamp. We could

hear birds chirping, as if they were whispering among themselves. Some birds merrily hopped from one place to the next. On the other end of the landscape, about twenty birds flew in a colourful formation. Some of the more sporty ones flew up and down, splashing aloud into the water. Andrei, ever ready with his camera and telelens held on a tripod, began taking pictures. Rejoicing aloud in Russian, he began clicking his camera shutter. At times he would remove his fingers from the shutter and clap, speaking to the birds in Russian, "Go, go, fly. Don't you know how far you have come? Look around and see how beautiful it is."

Andrei danced, coaxing the birds to dance along and to show their grace. As if reciting a poem, he said, "Pretty, how pretty! Look, there is a little village, and further down, there the sky is descending to kiss the earth."

Suddenly we heard the sound of a gunshot. Andrei, startled, looked around; my eyes followed him. Afar, on the

left side of the swamp, stood a man jumping in delight with a gun in his hand. Andrei, carrying his tripod on his shoulders, began running towards the man. I followed him. As we drew closer, we saw an elderly man. With a shotgun in his hand, he was pointing something at the water excitedly, "There, there." On the water lay a wounded bird, still fluttering its wings. A kid, aged 12 or 13, was swimming towards the bird.

I turned to the gentleman, "It seems you are an educated man, and yet you have no respect for law. Don't you know it is illegal to kill migratory birds?"

"Who are you, boy? How dare you teach me about law? Where do you come from?" the man hollered.

"Please, don't call me a boy. I am 32 years old and a father of one child."

"Do you know who you are talking to?"

"I could not care less. The fact is you have broken the law. I am a journalist. OK, tell me, who are you? Are you a parliament member, chairman of the local union council, a retired military officer, or a former senior government official? Which one are you?"

"Look young man, you sound rude. I am perfectly aware of the law. Who says it forbids hunting a few birdies?"

"Can you break the law deliberately? You don't look to be poor; neither are you in need of hunting birds to make ends meet. You have done it wrong, do you admit?"

"You better watch your words. It seems all journalists feel we owe them an explanation for everything we do."

"Not an explanation, all I wanted was to ask you whether you knew that killing migratory birds is an offense punishable by our law."

"Look, you have been rude from the outset. I am much older than you, you can't scream at me like that. In fact, I could be as old as your father. I won't tolerate it that some guy like you could show off his journalistic credentials and insult me. No, I won't tolerate that."

"Are you trying to threaten me?"

"My people have little regard for journalists and such people."

"So, you are threatening me, aren't you? Meanwhile, the kid swam back to the shore with a rather large duck. It was already dead. With blood dripping down its body, the bird's head hung down and its pupils motionless. Andrei ran to the boy and hurriedly grabbed the bird. Holding it close to his chest, he moaned, "My God! How cruel!"

The hunter gentleman, startled at Andrei's howling, looked up at him with surprise. Andrei, lifting a leg of the dead duck to examine it, saw that it carried a plastic ring. On it was written, "Moscow Zoo, Duck, Series

No. 3,009."

Moaning audibly, Andrei fell on the ground. I stood face to face with the gentleman, "Now, you see, this was a bird from a zoo. You are nothing but a brute, a butcher."

The gentleman, obviously embarrassed, could not find words to respond. He held on to the barrel of his gun and glanced guiltily at Andrei.

Andrei slowly rose from the ground. Bringing the dead bird close to his heart, he turned to face the multitude of birds on the swamp. Addressing them in a somber and anguished voice, he said, "Friends, now go home. Not a moment more at this place."

Andrei's words reverberated throughout the swamp, fading out slowly. Soon thereafter we could hear the birds fluttering. With their wings and feet, they began running on the water. The sound of their wings flapping could be heard all over. As they began flying up above the swamp, the sky became covered with countless chirping birds, drowning the earth with the sound of their flapping wings. They began flying towards the north. All around one could only hear the birds tweeting and their wings flapping.

When the last batch of birds faded from our vision, we looked at the swamp. Not a single bird was left. Only the morning sunlight shimmered on its yellow, muddy water.

The next day, newspapers reported that the migratory birds that had taken refuge in Savar had left the swamps and nearby ponds. Experts fearing that this might have been caused by a serious environmental pollution urged immediate investigation of the water, soil and other natural elements in the area.

Two weeks later on a Sunday morning, Andrei telephoned me. "My friend, I have been transferred. I am leaving you country for Poland."

"Don't people in Poland kill birds," I joked. Andrei laughed, "You're being silly."

Mashiul Alam is a novelist and short story writer. Hasan Ferdous is a columnist for Prothom Alo in New York.

Three Boi Mela Books

KHOKON IMAM

Dohon O Droher Golpo, edited by Jahanarah Nuri, is a collection of thirteen short stories brought out by publishers Utsha Prokashon, Dhaka. The stories center around the theme of women's oppression, domestic violence and women's rights, a condition that Ms Nuri says in her introduction has been further inflamed by the pressures generated by the difficult transition from a rural culture and village societal values to an urban culture and city-based way of life. The stories in this compilation, chosen from the works of such well-known authors such as Hasan Azizul Haq, Syed Shamsul Haq, Zakir

choosing them. Her sensitivity and care has been vindicated in this fine and balanced volume of stories.

A writer of a different sort is Mominul Hoque, a probashi Bengali academic residing in Pittsburgh, USA. Despite his long stay abroad, which included teaching at universities in Libya, Iraq and Nigeria as well as in America, his connection with Bangladesh has remained strong, as evidenced by his two books, one a novel and another a collection of short stories. Both were brought out by Adorn Publication, Dhaka. The novel, *Bhaati'r Deshe Jatra*, tells the tale of Hena, of a pir family, and her companion Shami. It is a tale of a hard life and love in a village setting -- a setting that is scrupulously rendered in naturalistic detail. The short stories, sixteen in all, in the volume titled *Shathi Ek Nokkhotray'r Naam*, are more varied in their settings, shifting from village to town and back, and reveal a sharply observant eye. Professor Sirajul Islam Chowdhury in his preface rightly observes that Hoque is a student of science (geology to be exact) and that his use of language contains no surprises, but that the stories work precisely because of its clarity and simplicity. Professor Chowdhury goes on to point out that Mominul Hoque took part in both the 1952 Language Movement (he was incarcerated at one point), and in the 1971 War of Liberation, and that his characters tend to distinctly be the product of both these profoundly national events. It gives to Hoque's writing a socio-political cast and depth. One therefore, especially in this month of February, has to whole-heartedly agree with Professor Chowdhury when he says that Mominul Hoque should certainly write more books, and that we readers expectantly wait for them.

Khokon Imam works for an NGO in Dhaka.



Talukdar and Rizia Rahman as well as younger authors such as Papri Rahman and Shaheen Akhtar, however, to a large extent escape the didacticism (almost as oppressive as the brutalities committed on women) associated with such literary enterprises. Ms Nuri is aware of such dangers, as when she writes that the short story form at first glance seems an easy enough form, but that its difficulties are familiar to writers, and that she has made sincere efforts to put literary merit at the top of her criterion for

Better Late Than Never: Kashinath Roy's Jibanananda Dekhoon

KAISER HAQ

Kashinath Roy began writing poetry in his teens, and in the sixties published regularly in periodicals like *Kanthalaswar* (edited by Abdullah Abu Sayeed). After that he published little, though he kept on writing -- poems, short stories, at least one novella. Some of these appeared in the irregular little magazine *Nirantar* (edited by Naim Hasan), and more recently, *Ekobingsha* (edited by K. Ashraf Hossain). He was sixty when he published his first book, a verse play he had written in his teens. Now, at sixty-one, he has published a substantial collection of recent poems, *Jibanananda Dekhoon* ("Take a Look, Jibanananda"). It is available from Bhashachitra, and I hope the Boi Mela crowds will notice it. The poems are forthright, often bitterly satirical, eminently readable, and a most pertinent commentary on the state of our nation. The following is my rather hastily done translation of the second poem in the book, 'Hazrat Nuh-er Nauka'.

Noah's Ark

My nightmare
squatting on the breast of sleep --
in the small hours
of last night

I lay watching:
churning the three realms
the deluge rises foaming and frothing,
and my terror-stricken homeland --
my Bangladesh --
cowering beneath
the raised paw of complete ruin.

Just then the great ark of Noah the prophet
comes caressing the despondent horizon
and lovingly docks at my head.
The mild instructions of ever-merciful Allah
resounded in my distraught consciousness.
In order to build a post-deluge community
I picked up
from Creation's motley throng
one by one, in couples, whatever thrives
in our homeland's discommoded soil:
peasants, workers, students, intellectuals
tycoons, merchants, grocers, ministers,
sentries, bureaucrats, officials,
newspapers and newsmen,
policies and policy-makers,
poets, artists, lovers;
with bated breath
I picked up a couple of country footpaths
and a couple of hamlets.

Heaving a sigh of relief, as I was about
to break into a song of regeneration
addressed to the future motherland,
the distressed conscience of the nation
broke through the waves and begged me
to restrain myself
with gaze fixed on the crowded heart of Noah's ark.
Following that gaze my two eyes
abruptly staggered to a halt.
Both hands pressed to my head, I saw
a fatal illness curled around the breast
of my salvaged land, swinging merrily:
malnourished peasant, dehumanized worker,
shortsighted students and intellectuals,
bogus industrialists, merchants, grocers,
tuggish minister, sentry, bureaucrat, official,
newspaper crushed under bad news,
newsman troubled by commercialism,
unprincipled policy-maker,
poet without prosody,
painter without form,
passionless lovers.
Even the carefree river is choked with sewage,
the footpaths bear chest wounds,
the hamlets are stricken with illness and sorrow.

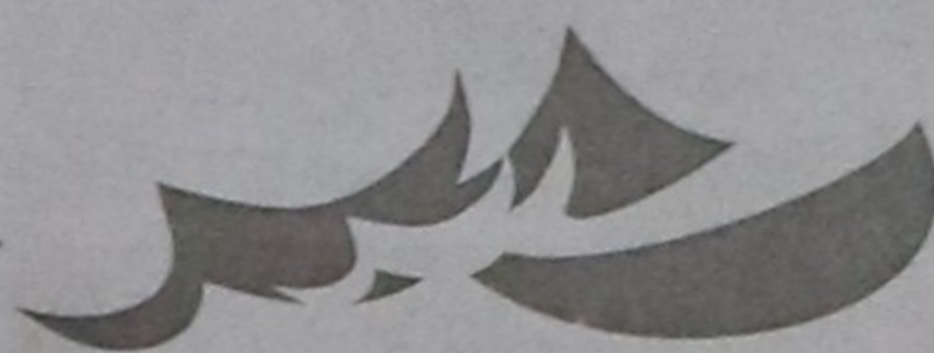


artwork by amina

Suppressing a cry of intolerable anguish,
one by one, I threw the wretched cargo overboard
into the omnivorous currents of the deluge,
and attempting to control a sigh
like a python's hiss, my hand
falling on the chest gave me a shock:
other than variegated scars
and impotent rage
and the stifling pressure of faithlessness
it felt nothing.
Raising limp hands in prayer to Khuda almighty.
I begged forgiveness
and plunged into the turbulent waves...

Bearing a void in its heart,
Hazrat Noah's hopeless ark
drifted towards an unknown destination.

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



February Friday

FARHANA MAZHAR ALI

the faithful hurry
for prayers
to a sky vacant
except for a jet
creasing the clouds

missing is my
uncle
who marched
in fiery '52
for his birthright
then slipped
into silence
watched the war
of 1971
from afar
saying to his wife
'look, things go around
come around
but never as
you want them.'

Farhana Mazhar Ali lives in Chicago
and travels extensively in South
Asia.

Arrested

SARKAR AMIN
(translated by Rafid Ahmed)

Lost the password through my own sheer absent-mindedness
The cat gives me a huge Cheshire grin
A hard rain outside...more desirable than sex

In the tumult somebody murders somebody else
The darkness sobs, in a little while the police will arrive
The question is: Who opened the door to the bewitched secret path?
Who is that scoundrel guard?

I've been caught by my own hands for a mistaken offence
I walk along a sleepless over-bridge
Zero (0) zero (0) zero (0)
Possibly 'desolate' is my password
For me desolation is really the best.

Rafid Ahmed is a translator and college teacher.

