

SHORT STORY

The Red Building

LUNA RUSHDI

The guava tree at the back of the building was slightly taller than the veranda. Once upon a time there must have been railings on the veranda; now it looked like an extra roof - above the ground floor and just below the real one. As kids we - my sisters and I - sometimes jumped over to the veranda from the tree. It once had a smooth cement floor, but now it was just dusty, rough concrete with cracks here and there. The pigeons did their business all over and the air was heavy with the pungent smell. We played house there and made lentil soup with mud, rice with the insides of cactus flowers, fish balls with the beadlike red seeds from a nearby hedge and served it all on plates of leaves.

The wooden door to one of the rooms on the upper floor always remained shut and we never tried to open it. The little room on the stairway did not have doors any more; it was as spotted with pigeon poop as the veranda. Everything was covered in a thick coat of dust and the smell inside was stronger than in the veranda. We never tried to climb down the stairs.

The red building faced a tall five-story building that accommodated ten flats - residences of Dhaka University teachers. There were five such buildings in our compound, all scattered around the red building. A portion of the red building was visible from all the flats. From our back balcony, we could see the back where the guava tree stood. On one side of the red building was the big round playing field. The field was covered with grass, where, except for the winter months, boys played football. In winter, the field was shared by boys and girls. On the sides of the field, there were flowerbeds with flowers of the season - dahlia, marigolds, chrysanthemums, roses... This area had a shaded feel to it with the boundary wall on one side, the flat building on the other - with just the top of the Dhaka University teacher's club visible past the boundary wall. Strange how we never thought that the red building was a 'house' - even though for a short time in our childhood, it did house a family in its only liveable room. Crazy Romel and his parents. I don't remember his parents, but crazy Romel used to walk to and fro whispering and smiling on his own, bouncing an invisible football with his right hand. He was said to be possessed by a genie.

Despite all its abnormalities I never felt the red building demanded any special attention. It was just... there, amongst many other unquestioned and unobserved things that we hardly notice other than in retrospect. At least until I met Didash. By then I was thirteen years old and my sisters were in primary school. As they were only a year apart, both belonged to the same group of friends within the neighbourhood. They had developed their own sign language, jokes and secrets to which I didn't have access to. Unlike my sisters' polished speech, the Bengali I spoke was the colloquial form that we used at home. This together with my unkempt appearance and a perpetually lost expression on my face did not really endear me to them at that age. Girls in my own age group tended generally to ignore me or laugh at me. I preferred being ignored.

Once in a blue moon the group would be short of a



artwork by sanjiv kanth das

playmate and reluctantly admit me into the group. It was on one such day that I was playing hide-and-seek with the group. Shurovi was a comparatively new arrival in our colony; she was two years my senior and normally never talked to me. On this day we were hiding together and she led me inside the red building. Nobody lived there anymore and no one went inside. We hid in the room where crazy Romel lived once.

Two nylon strings still hung tied to nails across the width of the room. Some torn papers on the floor. The two windows high up on the wall were closed. The walls were a reddish yellow colour like pages from an old diary. We almost forgot that we were in the middle of a hide-and-seek game until we heard a sound. It may have been the dried bougainvillea leaves on the carport rustling in the wind but it was enough to startle us. In her panic to find a hiding place inside the room, Shurovi grabbed me and pressed me against the wall behind the door. She held me in place with her body and her right hand came up to cover my mouth in case I screamed out. I felt her soft breasts against mine. Her heart was beating fast. Underneath her thin cotton dress her skin felt warm. Her body rubbed against mine and tickled me all over. I was hot and had goose bumps at the same time. My lips were parted and I could taste the skin on her palm - slightly salty with a faint fragrance of Nivea. Our eyes locked; hers shimmered like liquid. She caressed my face and her breath tingled the hairs on my skin. Something like

electricity shot through me and I had an urge to pee.

"Let's play lover lover," she whispered.

"What is lover lover?" I asked.

She chuckled, then kissed me on the lips. Her left hand came up to knead my breast; her thumb closed in on my nipple and traced it over and over again until they pricked out. "You silly thing..." she whispered again and I felt myself tremble.

Footsteps echoed near the hallway. Shurovi abruptly let go of me and ran out. I clumsily collapsed on the red cement floor. My body felt hot against the cool floor. The coolness seeped in and spread through my body like peace. Soothed, I fell asleep.

When I opened my eyes, a face hung suspended in mid air. Orange-tinged rays of the setting sun flooded through the window. His unshaven face was partly illuminated by the sunlight and glowed like one of those Jesus Christ posters the Christian missionaries used to bring along.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I am Didash, what are you doing here?"

"We were playing hide-and-seek..."

"Ah! Looks like nobody found you!" he smiled and winked in that friendly way adults often do.

"You did," I said. He smiled and raised one of his eyebrows.

"What are you doing here?"

"Checking out the building from inside."

"Why?"

"I am thinking of doing a painting of the building..."

"Are you an artist?"

"Not yet, I am a student at the Art College."

We talked for a few more minutes and then I went home.

Didash set up his canvas next to the children's playground. We were on our summer holiday. The Bengali New Year had almost arrived. For the first time in our neighbourhood's history, we were to have a variety show to welcome the New Year. A stage would be built in the middle of the playing field and preparations were in full swing. Rehearsals were being accommodated in small groups in various flats around the teacher's quarters. Even my sisters were selected for a dance.

I started to spend most of my free time watching Didash paint. I asked him why he picked the red building as his subject. He said it had history and character that it stood out and had a sense of mystery. He said it was built sometime in the nineteenth century during British rule in India. A judge lived there once and our entire compound was his garden.

The red building I knew was old and abandoned but in his painting it appeared regal. The bougainvillea creepers were painted in dark green and the papery flowers a deep magenta. Once as I was watching him paint, a street kid was sweeping the playground area and collecting dried

leaves. He painted her in his canvas as well. The girl in real life wore a torn frock but in his painting she was wearing a red sari. He told me that it was poetic justice. Things did not always have to be as they appeared.

One evening as I stepped out of one of the flats in front of the red building after attending a chorus class, I spotted Didash's canvas near the playground. It was late for him to be working. The sun had set and dusk disappeared giving way to night. I walked over to the canvas, nobody was there. The nearby flats had their lights switched on. Someone was frying onions and garlic; the air sizzled with the aroma. Someone else watched TV, tunes from a jingle floated in the surrounding. The red building stood alone; dead leaves stirred the air. Darkness halted there, condensed, like a folded cloth.

Suddenly I heard a throaty laugh from behind the pillars on the carport. I knew it was Shurovi. In my mind, memories from the day inside the red building were still fresh. Even though Shurovi has made no gestures of recognition on the numerous occasions we met after that, I still visualised her liquid eyes during private moments and it always filled me with warmth. As I silently approached the carport from behind the canvas, a husky male whisper mingled with the laughter. I saw two silhouettes locked in an embrace behind the bougainvillea bush. I moved away quickly.

On the evening of the rehearsal as my sisters and I walked towards the red building, we saw a group of four- and five-year-olds perched on the guava tree. We smiled at each other with a secret knowledge shining in our eyes. It was busy inside the red building. The entire ground floor had been cleaned up for the rehearsal. The red cement floor was shining and looked alive. The poetry recital group was setting up on a corner, the theatre group was already in mid-rehearsal, and a group of artists sat on a corner, cutting out words and pictures for the stage. I saw Didash amongst them. Shurovi was sitting amongst the dancers. They did not seem to recognise each other. Someone was singing a sad song about a lone flower. Her melancholy voice spread across the room and rose up towards the ceiling and then it scattered in tiny pieces like raindrops drenching us in the melody. A group of people laughed out a few minutes later, the laughter spread too and touched the same places the tune travelled, enveloping it completely. As if the melancholy still existed, but beneath the laughter.

Candles were lit as it got dark. In the flickering light our shadows appeared larger than ourselves. We appeared to be floating disconnected from the rest of the world. Like characters from pages of story books. I imagined the carport outside. The light spooling past the windows combined with the shadows of the bougainvillea creepers must have created a pretty pattern on the floor. Maybe a soft breeze whistled past those old pillars dropping a few petals. I imagined the red building gleaming like a fairytale palace, prettier than Didash's picture.

Luna Rushdi lives in New Zealand.

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KHOKON IMAM



When the latest issue of *Kali O Kolom* arrived for my review (an occasion I now look forward to, at least partly due to the fact that my friends have informed me that this reading exercise has had a markedly positive effect on my evening adda) I was mystified to find it unexpectedly voluminous. Publisher Abul Khair's Note however cleared up the mystery: *Kali O Kolom* has completed five years of its existence. Let us at *The Daily Star* be among those to congratulate the journal for

stepping vigorously into its sixth year, and wish it a long and illustrious life. In this regard Mr Khair writes that while his literary publication has had its many well-wishers, yet that sentiment has not translated into concrete and material support for the journal. This news was surprising, to say the least, since one had expected the very opposite. However, it is heartening to see that Mr Khair has pledged, like the present government faced with an array of challenges, to carry on come what may. A hearty Amen to that!

There are four articles on the special section on Dhaka, on the occasion of the city's 400th birthday: Nazrul Islam's *Dhaka: Pran Kendro O Pran e Ombesha*, Bishnu Basu's *Smrity Niye Dhaka*, Muntassir Mamoon's *Dhaka'r Jon Elaka Niye Trishash*, and Robiul Hussain's *Priyo Dhaka Shohor O Taar Charsho Bochor*. Among the four the most enjoyable read is Bishnu Basu's, a lively account in the first person about a bygone Dhaka's puja festivities, while Mamoon's as usual is a thoroughly informative piece. Among the essays there is one on Sir William Jones, the linguistic prodigy who established the Asiatic Society and is considered the father of Indian Orientalists. Though the title of the article promised much (*William Jones O Bharat Abishkar*), the content is disappointingly a straightforward account which fails to engage in any significant way with Jones's contentious Orientalist legacy, one outcome of which was an imperial historiography that continues to this day to bitterly divide the subcontinent along communal and religious lines. Another piece of note is a long account by Prothom Alo's New York-based columnist Hasan Ferdous of Rumer Godden's novel 'River', which is set in Narayanganj at the turn of the last century and was made into a film by the famed French director Jean Renoir. Rumer Godden was a British author who stayed there as a child and in her novel can be found details of a time and place which are unlikely to be found anywhere else. It is therefore of special significance to us - as Hasan Ferdous writes in his thoroughly researched article: "... though the novel was written in Kolkata, yet the story is not about Kolkata but of East Bengal's Narayanganj." The article is accompanied by Hasan's numerous illustrative and careful translations, which add to the pleasure of reading it. Also thought provoking is Abul Mansur's *Bonger Charushilpi Jogo*, written with knowledge.

There are a substantial number of short stories in this volume, eighteen to be exact, by Abubakr Siddiqui, Hasnat A Hye, Dibendu Palit, Anowara Syed Huq, Purabi Basu, Syed Manzoorul Islam, Kanai Kundu, Wasi Ahmed, Nasrine Jahan, Nalini Bera, Hamid Kaiser, Papree Rahman, Najib Wadud, Badrun Nahar, Harishankar Jaldash, Dipambita G Mukhopadhyaya, Sajid Hosain and Hasan Arindam. Among them notable are *Baali'r Chora* by Najib Wadud, Papree Rahman's *Mongakronto Akalur Maach Somachar*, Anowara Syed Haq's *Gondi* and Kanai Kundu's *Ekta Khun Hobay*. Special mention should be made of Papree Rahman's story, featuring a man named Akalu and of various

hungers that lurk in human bellies. It is cast in a mode quite unlike any other writer in Bangladesh, written in a fluent colloquial flow and exhibits deep familiarity with our rural way of life. In the nonfiction area both Hasan Azizul Haq and Jyotiprakash Dutta have given us delicately-hued reminiscences - the latter's one on friendship and the writing life in a bygone age in Dhaka's Islampur - something that warrants the reflection that he would have been an ideal writer to ask about something on Dhaka section of the magazine too. There is a welcome change in the present issue with the inclusion of a feature on ducks in Bangladesh by Sharif Khan, a delightful Nature piece. Anybody even remotely interested in Bangladesh's wildlife, and particularly its birds, in conservation and environmentalism, will welcome such pieces in the future. Abdus Shakoor has contributed a light piece 'Intermediate Term', while Shahid Quadri has given us two poems - his gradual emergence in *Kali O Kolom*'s poetry pages is a welcome one. While in this volume the book reviews at the end are absent (no doubt due to an annual volume's design requirements), yet readers can round up the reading with a spirited review of a film festival at the Dhaka Goethe Institute by Fouzia Khan. And as an aside, here one wonders if *Kali O Kolom* would consider including writer bios in its future issues.

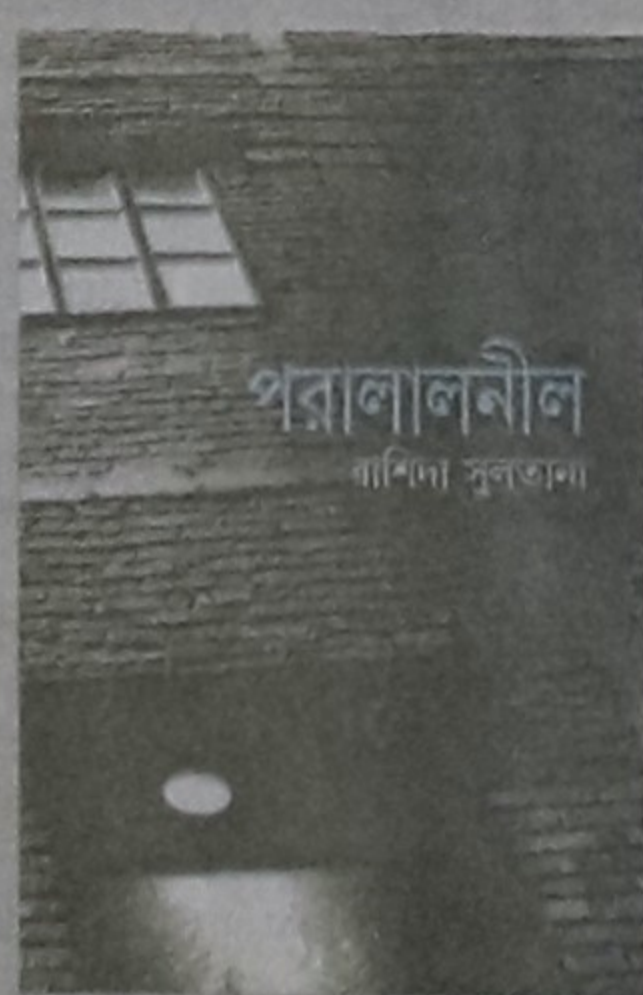
The artwork accompanying the text on the inside is as luminous as ever, surely a cause for envy of all other publishers of magazines and literary journals (whether little or mainstream). However, it may not be out of place to note that the choice of lead artist for this annual issue could have been less reflective of *Kali O Kolom*'s generational bias. It might have been interesting to see what a younger, more zesty artist would have done with such an opportunity. The graceful cover painting is by Kazi Abdul Baset (1935 - 2002), a 'first-generation' Bangladeshi artist of repute. As can be seen on the journal's cover, despite being exposed to a tumultuous period of experimentation by Western artists when he was in Chicago from 1963-65, Baset stayed true to his native artistic heritage and traditions.

Khokon Imam works for a Dhaka NGO. He wishes to thank the literary editor of *The Daily Star* for the translations of his Bengali reviews, which enables him to reach the readers of this newspaper.

A Good Find

Rashida Sultana is a short story writer and frequent contributor to the literature pages of Bengali dailies and little magazines. She is also an accomplished poet of ordinary life, infusing small moments with a heightened colour and clarity that underlines a quietly dissident feminine voice.

Rashida has previously published two volumes of short stories, on the themes of loneliness, domestic discord and love/lorn lives of the Bengali middle and lower middle class, a social segment whose profiles she draws with a swift sureness. In her latest collection of short stories aimed at the Ekushey boi mela, *Porolaaneeel*, she displays that same sharp eye and ear for their bedrooms and speech, but her convictions about society's victims, its transients, seem to have become stronger, and more emphatic. For readers whose tastes run along such lines, she is a good find, and even better read.



পরলাানেল
রশিদা সুলতানা

Arun Kolatkar: the lavish gift of the artist

KHADEMUL ISLAM

About a year back Arun Kolatkar's book of poems titled *Kala Ghoda Poems* landed on my desk, waiting to be reviewed. Then other things intervened; time blew by; I forgot. It is time to make small amends.

Arun Balkrishna Kolatkar (1932-2004) was born in November 1932 in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. He was a bilingual poet, writing in both Marathi (a language in which he was heir to a long and distinguished literary heritage) as well as in English. Kolatkar was what is sometimes referred to as a poet's poet, a diversely talented being who studied in India's JJ School of Fine Arts, became a prize-winning art director and graphic designer in Bombay/Mumbai, and wrote *Jejuri*, which if I'm not mistaken was the only book of English poems by an Indian to ever win the Commonwealth Prize in 1977. He was also a determined loner, somebody who never had a phone (Amit Chaudhuri wrote that he had to call Kolatkar on his neighbour's phone in order to talk to Arun long distance), and could be found one day of the week at the Wayside Inn at Kala Ghoda crossroads in Mumbai, a haunt of his for 20 years where he drank coffee, doodled, and from whose window he looked out at the city's castoffs, low life, sundry lost souls, vagrants and their surreal crawl. It was out of those afternoons at Kala Ghoda that this book of poems came out. It is in some ways an extraordinary rendering of Mumbai, a book in which a city is simultaneously observed and is observer, is spoken about and yet is speaking to itself, in precisely observed details and finely calibrated sentences to only fitfully lapse into mumbling in half-understood street argot, in which shards of light fall across the brooding shadows in no particular pattern, and where, in his attempt to limn and capture Mumbai's vast contradictions are reflected the same insidious, untenable, insufferable, unsupportable oppositions, contradictions and dualisms that confront us in our daily lives in innumerable ways: knowledge versus belief, the general versus the specific, appearance versus reality, mind versus body. At another level, of course, by recording the vast, sheer, brute, immovable, undeniable *physicality* of the world of the poor and the floating, Kolatkar was bestowing - concealed in the corners of his lines, beneath the sardonic recording eye - a strained mercy on these blighted lives, which is the last, lavish gift of the artist.

Following is an extract from the poem 'Meera', about a woman garbage collector on the Mumbai's streets trundling her 'honey cart' - the cart for hauling garbage originally designed for London streets and which then was transplanted to Mumbai:

5. Euclid would have loved it - that rickety looking rattletrap, that garbage trolley.

The honey cart, that looks like a theorem picked clean of proof,

has all the starkness and simplicity of a child's drawing done in black crayon.

It's a wrought-iron tray that cradles two wicker bins the size of laundry baskets

Held in place by two equilateral triangles on either side, it stays close to the ground

Kala Ghoda Poems



Arun Kolatkar

6. When it is full nearly to the brim, she climbs to the top

and begins to dance within the narrow compass of the wicker bin

like a Meera before her Lord, a Meera with a broomstick for a lute;

shifting her weight from one foot to the other, she turns around herself

by slow degrees, giving her toes enough time

to genuflect and offer obeisance to all the cardinal points,

to each of the thirty-two compass points, in turn.

Her free arm, raised in the air, is a flamingo in flight.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, *The Daily Star*.