Mourning Under a Mimosa

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I can't bear the shocking news coming from Dhaka. For the last few days I have done nothing but follow in horror the gruesome revelations on TV and in print, watching helplessly as innocent families are slammed with this unimaginable national tragedy. I want to embrace all those who lost their loved ones and say something to console them. Even after my prayers for the souls of the deceased and for the bereaved, my throat is still aching with an urge to cry out with a resounding: WHY?

I can't bear to read any more details about the barbarity of brother against brother, about this world of mayhem by men. I rush out for fresh air and walk aimlessly up my road, my eyes not really registering the cold world of winter coming to life under a glorious spring sun. My heart is too heavy to be distracted. And right in front of me the Mimosa assaults me with its outrageous beauty.

For shame! I want to say to it. Fly your beauty at half-mast. My country is distraught; we are in mourning. Could you please show some respect for our grief? Could you not blaze with such blatant beauty? I want to scold the Mimosa and quote to it those famous words of Auden:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.....

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

This last line, I mutter again and again: 'For nothing now can ever come to any good'. I recognise this sentence for a familiar feeling of years ago. It was 25th March of that brutal year 1971-- such a defining moment for those of my generation who like me were idealistic teenagers at the time, innocent of the world's cruelties. Standing at night on the roof of my parent's house, we saw the ominous red horizon, and among other things: Pilkhana in flames. And the world changed.

It's almost March now, 38 years later, the anniversary month of our nation. When we should be celebrating turning the corner in a nation's blood-soaked history, what do we hear? The same dirge: of mass graves and corpses, of bayoneting and blood-letting, of tanks in the street, of helmets and boots, of bullets and bodies..... only worse, only worse!

We thought we had finished with violence forever and could say like Edgar Alan Poe's Raven: NEVER MORE! We thought only barbarous outside forces were capable of inflicting injury and death on the citizens of our nation, and we had arrived at a safe place.

Oh! How naïve we were. Our innocence would be shattered over and over by men who felt little compunction about taking justice into their own hands. Didn't we know that once we allowed even one injustice, one crime to go unpunished: nothing would ever come to any good? But no one raised a voice against the violent deaths in jails and at home of our leaders who inspired and led our nation to liberation. We tolerated one military coup after another. And even when a semblance of democracy was instituted, not only were past crimes and criminals forgotten, fresh crimes were allowed to be committed at many levels.

And tolerating these crimes--- political, social, individual, without pushing for accountability became our culture: the culture of impunity. And over time, an absence of justice, investigation, trials, punishment, and