

SHORT STORY

Pink Slip*

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

Ken's cell phone rang very early in the morning, even before his alarm went off.

"Who on earth would be calling me at this hour?" he wondered, as he reached for the phone. People who had his cell number knew better than to wake him up at 6 a.m. on a chilly morning, he thought. Besides, he was not on-call today.

"Hi, Ken, hope I did not wake you up!" the voice on the other side said softly. It was Sam, his department head.

Ken sat up on the bed. "Oh, no, not at all, Sam. I would have gotten up anyway. My alarm is set to go off in a minute," he lied. Donna cracked open her eyes, and waved her hand at Ken to go take the call in the hallway outside the bedroom.

"Ken, listen up, we had to let Jeff go," Sam sounded apologetic on the other side. "What?" Ken almost screamed out loud. Jeff was his closest buddy in the Purchasing Department where both worked. It was no secret that Tribeca Company, where they worked, was trying to keep afloat in these hard times, and memos had been circulating from on top about cutbacks and layoffs. Last week there had been a meeting of the Division heads about the company's future that Ken had attended; afterwards he had pulled Jeff aside to tell him that while there would be some layoffs, their department might be spared.

But Jeff is such a hard-working guy. He received the best performance review last year! Ken said, knowing deep down that his protest was probably futile. Sam simply responded by saying, "You know it was not my call. Last night Mr. Cox called me and told me that we had to lay off ten staff. And Jeff was picked from my department!"

Ken hung up and tiptoed back to his bed. Donna asked in a sleepy tone, "Who called so early, Ken?"

"Oh, you wouldn't believe it...," he initially thought of giving her the full story, then changed his mind. Donna was the sort that got shaken by bad economic or financial news. "It's something at work that Sam needs my help with."

He closed his eyes, and tried to get some more shut-eye, but his mind kept wandering to how they'd face Jeff later in the morning. He finally got up again. It was 6:30 and the sky was starting to turn red. He took a quick shower, made some coffee and tried to catch



artwork by amina

up on the latest news and weather forecast on TV, only to turn it off when the Today Show began its coverage of the Nikkei Index.

It was past 8:00 o'clock when he reached his office. It was early and the office was almost empty. He first checked at Sam's office on the fifth floor to see if he was in. The door was locked. He then peeped into Jeff's cubicle: the usual files on his desk, his computer on sleep mode and stationery strewn across the desk. Jeff's wife Cindy's photograph was on the desk. Ken hated to imagine how she would take the news of Jeff's layoff. As Ken walked to his own cubicle his thoughts veered towards Donna: how would she react if he had instead gotten the pink slip? He didn't like breaking bad news to Donna, and in the past had often resorted to various ploys during crunch times. When a check bounced last month, he had borrowed from a credit card rather than transfer money from their joint savings account to cover the check. Donna liked eating out and was always signing up for holiday trips with her parents. Ken never said no to her habit of changing furniture pieces

every few years.

He turned on the computer, his mind drifting to the early morning call and the coming farewell encounter with Jeff. Right after nine o'clock, his phone rang. It was Sam. "I've told Jeff the news, and he is in his office cleaning up his desk. We'll take him out for coffee and I hope you can join us. Brad and Kathy are also coming. We'll meet at the lobby downstairs, okay?"

"Sure." They all met in the parking lot and piled into Sam's car. With Sam behind the wheel and his eyes concentrated on the road, there were a few minutes of silence as the car took a right turn on Fifth Avenue. With Jeff's layoff on their minds, the air was heavy with a mix of sadness and empathy for him. Finally, Ken, feeling very uncomfortable in the stuffy environment within the car, as well as from a sense that as Jeff's closest office buddy, he needed to break the ice, said, "So where are we going?"

"Good question," said Sam, without taking his eyes off the road or betraying any sign of his own sense of unease.

"Shall we try the Dunkin' Donuts?" Ken asked. The coffee shop was at a major intersection two miles down from the office.

They all said "yeah" at almost the same time. Except for Jeff, who was staring blankly out of the car window.

At Dunkin' Donuts, they sipped coffee and engaged in small talk. The cold winter, and this morning's news of further trouble in the US auto industry came up. Finally, Sam, finding an opportunity to steer the conversation towards the purpose of the trip to offer some moral support - asked Jeff, "So have you called your wife?"

"Yes. She started crying, but she'll be OK. Next week Cindy's going back to work." Sam and Ken knew that Cindy was on maternity leave. Ken quietly heaved a sigh of relief - at least one of them would be working. Also, the few weeks that Jeff would be looking for a job, he'd be able to bond with his son.

Kathy finally asked, "So what do you plan

to do?"

"Well..." Jeff took a deep breath and paused. Nobody knew if Jeff had had any time to think about it or was prepared for the question. But then he came back pretty confidently, "I have to update my resume, start networking, go through Craig's List and the Help Wanted newspaper sections." Then he seemed to shift gears: "I am not sure, though, that this is the best time to look for a job." He took a sip of his coffee. "I have a few friends at my old job, and I will give them a call. We'll also save on babysitting expenses, I guess, if I stay home with Jake," he added, finishing on an upbeat note.

Ken felt like asking about the severance pay and unemployment insurance, but was not sure if this was the right time to do so. He decided he'd call Jeff later at home and offer support and help.

They all drove back to the office and parted with another round of hugs and words of support for Jeff. Ken did not go back to his office but sat down on a bench on the sidewalk and gave Donna a call. When Donna heard about Jeff, she paused for a few seconds, and finally said, "I feel very bad for Cindy. She just had the baby and probably is feeling very anxious just on that account. Now, all this with Jeff! I don't know how I'll handle something like this."

"Oh honey, you don't have to worry about us," Ken tried to reassure Donna, knowing that news like this could send her into mild hysteria.

Jeff and Ken stayed in touch over the next few months. Jeff told him that he was spending six to eight hours a day searching the Internet for job openings, attending informational interviews and job fairs, and applying for fifteen job openings a week. Ken would call him up every other day and chat about office and job market prospects. Cindy was very supportive, and was trying to get him a job in her office. Jeff was also thinking of taking an online course on Medical Informatics to boost his resume.

In late March, the office went through another round of job cuts and a few, including Ken, were assigned to a regime of a three-day work-week. Donna was a little more cranky than usual for a few days after she heard the news of Ken's reassignment. He could hear her spend hours on the phone talking to her parents in Georgia discussing job opportunities in Atlanta where her parent lived. Ken had

made up his mind about not moving to Georgia, since he had a brother and two sisters in Connecticut and Massachusetts. If things got worse, he could always count on them for job leads and a support network.

A few months went by, and life went on as usual except Ken and Donna were seeing less of each other at home. Ken spent more and more time in the library researching job prospects and attending networking meetings, which he found to be very stimulating. Being with others who had lost their jobs, while Ken still had his, gave him a feeling of self-confidence that he lacked either at work or at home. He heard about and starting warming up to the idea of going into a new job field, and heard from the participants that new federal stimulus money was being offered to those who lost their jobs or wanted to get job training. Ken did not share all these tidbits with Donna since he feared that information overload could lead her to depression.

One week, Ken came back from a support group meeting of ex-Wall Streeters and saw Donna awake and packing in the bedroom. He waited for a minute outside the bedroom door, filled with foreboding. Finally he asked, "Where are you off to, Donna? Is everything okay?"

"I'm going to Atlanta to see my parents for a few days. I might even check out the job market there. I didn't tell you in advance 'cause I didn't want to alarm you since I know you don't want to move to the South."

Ken felt a little lump in his throat. He said, "Hmmm. So you are thinking of moving! But I thought you were okay for now at your job. Have I missed something? You still have the job, right?"

"Oh, yes," Donna said without looking up from her suitcase, which was almost packed.

"So why are you then giving me the pink slip?" Ken said in a faint attempt to lighten up the mood.

"Oh, Ken, don't dramatize this slight change in arrangement. We all need a little break, and maybe this will do us both good." She stood up and reached for the phone to call a cab for the airport.

*Pink slip: American colloquialism for the pink-coloured notice of termination of employment.

Dr. Abdullah Shibli lives and works in the Boston area.

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KHOKON IMAM

The present government's incompetence in terms of power supply is not only causing untold miseries during a sweltering heat wave to an electorate that trusted it to govern, and govern well, but is also ruining my writing of *Kali O Kolom* reviews. Since I happen to live in an ordinary neighbourhood without *montri mohadois* nearby on whose uninterrupted power grids I could have a free ride, I am victim to savage load shedding. The power disruptions have frayed my temper to the point where the joy in carrying out my otherwise pleasurable monthly task has vanished. So if this particular review seems somewhat disorganized, I beg the indulgence of readers. I confess that even though I was delighted at the election result I'm now radically revising my opinion. A plague, I feel like swiping, on both political houses - Capulet and Montague!

In the letters to the editor section regular letter writer Ms Ashrifa Khan Nova laments the bad days that have fallen on '*Bangla bhasha and Shongskriti*' with reference to a previous article by Anupam Shaha on the topic. She blames this condition on English. I used to be of that opinion myself, but am revising my position here too. It seems to me now to be too simplistic an explanation for the decline, with English being a handy scapegoat for a loss that otherwise well-intentioned Bangla-language proponents cannot, or will not, examine objectively. Due consideration should be given to our failed educational system and policies, which keep reproducing modes of illiteracy, or a particular kind of literacy, that promotes and popularizes in turn an 'illiterate' Bangla. Illiteracy is not the product of English. It is the product of failed national education policies. The slide is aided by an aggressive Hindization of traditional Bangla culture - yet none of the Bangla-language worthies ever speak out against Hindi television soaps and movies. I should also mention here that I sent my two sons to English-medium schools - just like other such proponents whose children also attend English-medium schools. Or if they can afford it, send them abroad for higher study where they learn not just English but also a whole culture that their fathers decry so vehemently in Dhaka drawing rooms and television talk shows. My two sons display a disheartening lack of interest in Bangla. This disinterest cannot be attributed solely to the charms of English - it may be that what we know to be Bangla is either inherently losing some inner vitality, or it's changing to an extent where the older ones among us no longer recognize it as the language we learnt and spoke in our childhood and youth. The cause is also not helped by those Bangla writers putting out rubbish in the guise of 'literature'. Youth drifts away; and the drift is unstoppable given our current standards of education, the pull of modernity, and our occasional hypocrisy. Language and culture must adapt, or die. So is the 'decline' in Bangla *bhasha and shongskriti* that the Old Guard bemoans (including I at times) an adaptation to a changing world, or truly a decline in standards?



Whatever the answer may turn out to be, in this context one must acknowledge that *Kali O Kolom's* endeavour to publish a reputed Bangla literary journal is one that should be continually supported. In principle, it is fighting the good fight.

Given the above long introduction I'll concentrate my review on a few pieces only. Among the short stories, '*Charandashi*' by Harishankar Jaldash is enjoyable. It is a story about a fishing community, which is a rarity these days where tales are set in urban landscapes and depict the travails of the city's petit-bourgeoisie. Though the story hinges on a clichéd plot device (mistaken lover, wrong paternity), yet the passage of time in a fishing village, the lives led by the sea's edge, the portrait of the father with his four sons are drawn in a convincing manner.

'*Shahid Quadri's Wasteland*' is the first bad piece I have encountered by the otherwise redoubtable Prothom Alo columnist and occasional *Kali O Kolom* contributor Hasan Ferdous. He has labored mightily to organically connect Eliot's '*The Wasteland*' to Shahid Quadri's famous poem '*Brishti Brishti*', yet all that effort cannot conceal the fact that his central thesis stands on thin ground. Hasan's methodology is to furiously pile one descriptive detail on top of

another - a method by which any fool with a modicum of academic training can force connections between the works of tens of Bengali poets and Eliot's classic; a hundred of Shamsur Rahman's poems can be tied to the urban desiderata of '*The Wasteland*'. Hasan's motive - to boost efforts currently underway to 'rehabilitate' Shahid Quadri's standing among readers who have forgotten a fine poet due to his long self-exile - is honorable, but the practice is wrong. Such attempts will eventually backfire.

There are two fine in-memoriams to Krishna Chattapadhaya, the celebrated exponent of the songs of Atul Prasad and Dwijendra Lal. I myself was introduced to her songs by my late elder sister, and remain especially fond of her Dwijendra Lal renditions. One of the in-memoriams, '*Taharay Bhulibo Bolo Kaymnay*' by Milia Ibrahim, written in a very personal vein, was moving to the point of bringing me to tears, and novel in terms of form, with the narrative being divided into episodic segments.

Professor Kabir Chowdhury has done a long-overdue and fine translation into Bangla of Orhan Pamuk's celebrated '*My Father's Suitcase*'. In the art review section Zahid Mustafa gives good coverage of artist Kazi Salahuddin's show titled '*Nagar Ananda*' held recently at Bengal Gallery. I myself went to see the exhibition, and was glad to see the emergence of a fresh, individual talent.

The cover art *Boshanter Porbotay Teen Bondhu* is a 2005 acrylic work by artist Kanak Champa Chakma, with her distinctive use of colour and themes, which draws on the folk tales and plain lives of the paharis of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. She graduated from Dhaka University's Charukala Institute in 1986, and stayed on a fellowship in 1993-94 at Pennsylvania University.

Khokon Imam works at an NGO in Dhaka.

Padma Meghna Jamuna

FARHAD AHMED

The title of this review is the evocative one of the book under review, a collection of modern poetry from Bangladesh edited by Kaiser Haq, professor of English at Dhaka University. It was published this year from New Delhi by the Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature. One is invited to sail on a huge river of poetry by Bangladeshis, largely in translation, but with also a few in the original English.

Introductions to such anthologies, especially of poetry, are difficult to write. This is especially so in the case of Bangladesh, where one must define,



Wish
Zahidul Huq
(translated by Kabir Chowdhury)

If I were an idle April noon
I would go and watch in your eyes
Some blades of grass.
Sad musical bells,
I would go and dance with your rhythmic feet,
Weeping tears of blood,
and suddenly an April fire
would burst into flames.
If I were a copper coloured telegraph wire
I would relay to you all my failures,
any unfinished songs,
grief-stricken flowers.
Oh, if I were only a little boy
In this month of impossible desires.

elucidate, demarcate and sum up within the space of a few pages the specific product of a geographical area that nevertheless shares with 'the Bengali-speaking parts of India...the entire Bengali literary heritage that had its inception in the Buddhist *Charyapada*, and over the centuries grew to encompass a broad range of folk literary forms, from the devotional Vaishnava lyrics to gripping narratives like the *Manasamangal*, before the impact of British rule 'globalized' Bangali literature by infusing varied western influences." Kaiser Haq does a terrific job here, lucidly unpeeling the layers, and convincingly makes a case for taking as a starting point for modern Bangladeshi poetry (given that we "adopt(ed)...Kazi Nazrul Islam as the national poet of Bangladesh,") from 1942 onwards, the year Nazrul

Remembering
(Neda Agha Soltan. 1982-2009. Tehran.)
Shabnam Nadiya

As we sit here and remember you, the calmness of eyes we had never seen before is overthrown and muddled; the chant of a million voices deadened, briefly, in the silence of yours;

as we sit here and remember you, green becomes black right before our eyes and right becomes blood.

And only in the death throes that we have never known do we hear how you call to us.

We speak because, finally, it is silence that means death. We die, for it takes more than death to silence us.

Shabnam Nadiya is a writer, translator and editor based in Bangladesh.

Guessing by What I Glimpsed
Asad Chowdhury
(translated by Fakrul Alam)

I still haven't been able to figure out
Which is more potent:
The river or its current?
It could be the river
For its bank contains
Fish and the ebb and flow of tides
And displays both restlessness and placidity.
It could be the river,
To which our green rice fields
Remain indebted.
But the current?
No, I'll never know what it is capable of,
Guessing by what I glimpsed of it
In 1971!

fell silent. An exception was made in the case of Sufia Kamal since, even though her poetry pre-dated this starting point, "from the 1950s onwards that she really began to make her presence felt."

The collection has 73 poets in translation, and three who write in English, spread over some 215 pages. It leads off with Sufia Kamal, and ends with Audity Phalguni in the translation section, arcing over the intervening decades and poets - Abdul Ghani Hazari, Hasan Hafizur Rahman, Al Mahmud, Shamsur Rahman (of course!), Syed Shamsul Haq Belal Chowdhury, Abdul Mannan Syed, Rafiq Azad, Ruby Rahman, Zarina Akhtar, Taslima Nasrine, Shamim Reza are some of the names. The three English language poets are Kaiser Haq, Firoz Ahmed-ud-din and Farida Majid. Given the disorganized, individual and idiosyncratic nature of translations from Bengali to English in Bangladesh, especially of poems, it is to be expected that the translations are of uneven quality. Overall, though, the jarring points are surprisingly low (perhaps because the editor oversaw "a fair amount of new, freshly commissioned" translations), and superior paper and print quality make for a pleasant reading experience. The biographical notes, always a weak point in such Bangladeshi collections, here are crisp and well-written. A few translator bios are missing, no doubt due to pressure of deadlines, which also account for a few typos and unwarranted capitalizations of words. The principal design flaw, as it were, is the loud 'branding' of the book as a SAARC/FOSWAL product, with an overly lengthy bio of its founder Ajeet Cour and her detailed note about the organization on the back cover.

But then, there's always a ticket price to pay for a memorable boat ride.

Farhad Ahmed is an occasional contributor to The Daily Star Literature page.

Atlas
Nuzhat Amin Mannan

Left you an atlas to look
At and
Feel your way back into
Togetherness
The pages are a bit frayed at the edges
And one or two pages may actually
Be missing but
It is quite a complete guide
To an utterly, shatteringly lonely planet.

Nuzhat Amin Mannan, on leave from Dhaka University's English department, currently lives in Morocco.