

NON-FICTION

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

One Sunday a few weeks back I was at a party where I heard that author Salman Rushdie had offended some students, particularly those from India, with a speech he gave at Tufts University. He had apparently made a reference to the fact that while the number of deities in the various religions in India was fixed, the population has been growing since ancient times, thus causing an imbalance. According to Ashfaq, a faculty member of the Tufts School of Medicine, who attended the Rushdie meeting, some of the students and teachers got up and left in protest. As I was listening to Ashfaq's account of the Tufts event, I felt sorry that I had passed up the opportunity to hear and meet Rushdie in person. I recall receiving an email from my daughter, who is a Tufts alumna, and who, in deference to my admiration for Rushdie, had not only forwarded the announcement from Tufts, but had asked me if I would be interested to go. As alum, she was entitled to a ticket, which she was willing to give up for me. I had declined the offer because the Tufts University campus was an hour's drive from my house, and the event took place on a Sunday afternoon and it would have been followed by a reception. If I had gone to the speech and the subsequent reception, I was afraid that I wouldn't have been able to get back home before midnight and thereby suffer the inevitable consequences of such misadventures, the dreaded Monday Morning Sickness, as we call it.

Monday Morning Sickness (MMS), for those who are not familiar with the concept, according to Webster's Online Dictionary, refers to those 'ailments' that occur when an individual gets back to work after one or two days of rest. However, comedians and the cable TV channel Comedy Central have now expanded the definition to include the following human conditions:

a. any discomfort, such as hangovers or sheer laziness, that makes one feel like not



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going to work on Monday morning, and b. general absenteeism and or tardiness that one notices in the workplace every Monday morning.

In a country like USA, where many workers have to punch in a timecard or report their arrival time on timesheets, MMS does not go unnoticed, even if sometimes overlooked by bosses, when workers show up late on Monday morning.

Cynics might doubt that MMS is a serious issue, but statistics don't lie! It is estimated that in the USA approximately 50 percent of the workforce reported suffering from MMS every year, and in any given week, between 10 percent and 20 percent of the workers either call in sick Monday morning or show up late for work. In fact, to deter MMS, some offices have a policy to the effect that Monday morning sick calls count as vacation days. If you call in sick on Monday morning, you pay for it: it is deducted from your vacation time.

Now coming back to my own personal travails, the morning after the aforementioned party, I started suffering from MMS. No, I did not overstay at the party, which really was a cookout, since it fizzled out

after dusk. We came back home on time, but with all the food that I had ingested at this party - thanks to the wonderful barbecue skills of Shah, a physician by profession, but also self-proclaimed 'world's best tandoori chicken chef.' I sat down on the couch in front of the TV weighed down by the multiple servings of grilled chicken being digested in my belly and started watching the final game of the NBA between the Los Angeles Lakers and the Orlando Magic. That's where my trouble started. Before long, I realized that the game had gone past midnight Eastern Time. I sometimes wonder how unfair it is for West Coast events to go past the bedtime for hard-working East Coast souls like me. Basketball games on TV, which usually start at 7:45 PM to coincide with prime viewing time, allow the game to end before the nightly news at 11:00. However, when these games are played in a West Coast locale, the time difference causes havoc on the East Coast. Monday Morning Sickness reaches an epidemic level on the Monday following Super Bowl if the game is played on the West Coast. I sometimes wonder why the early settlers in the US had to go beyond the Mississippi River, when there was so much land on the east side. Some have

speculated that Pakistan broke up because the Bengalis got fed up with West Pakistani domination of the airwaves on late night TV shows.

Coming back to Rushdie, I was reading a short story by him in a recent issue of *The New Yorker* magazine. In the short story, "In the South", Rushdie gives us a tour of the life of two elderly men and how they pass life, as they are "waiting to die," in the words of one of the octogenarian. As I read through the account of these two geriatric persons I started reflecting on my own future, particularly after retirement, as age creeps up on me gradually. Only last year, I was thinking that I might be able to retire at 62, or in the worst-case scenario, at 65. That would allow me 10 to 15 years to travel around the globe and see places I have not been to, particularly in the Southern part of Africa, before senility lays its irrefutable claim to my mind and body. I figured that Social Security checks from the government and my own savings in 401 (K) accounts would given I and my wife a decent lifestyle, and if I could combine that with a mixed regime of six months of stay in the USA and six months in Bangladesh, I could lead a comfortable life without going on dole or depending on the charity of my children.

Now all these dreams have gone up in smoke. From what I hear, the baby boomers like us can look forward to working and toiling until we are 70. When I saw these projections, I felt like calling up the authors of these projections, uncaring economists who are bent on extracting the last drop of blood from septuagenarians, and give them a piece of my mind. However, when I shared my indignation with my wife and told her of my plans to call the economist and tell him how faulty his model is and heartless his projections are, she calmly said, "Ok, take it easy! Who is asking you to work until 70? All you have to do is retire when you are ready and move to Bangladesh, and I am sure we'll be able to live comfortably on our savings and government

checks."

I could not believe that she said that. She knows that I am addicted to watching my favorite shows on TV every evening: 60 Minutes on Sunday, Monday Night Football on NBC, The Mega Millions lottery draw on Tuesday night, and so on. How does she think I am going to survive in Bangladesh without these shows? I just could not tell her that's the reason why I hate to move to Bangladesh. Instead, I threw her a curve ball: What if the exchange rate goes the other way? Not being adept at the fuzzy logic of economists, she finally saw my point and conceded that moving back to Bangladesh, with volatility in the exchange rate and a banking system that might collapse again, would mean that we have to stuff all our savings in \$100 bills in big suitcases, and lie about it at the airports. Yes, that would be too risky a move, she accepted.

On this Monday morning, I finally managed to get up, and went to the store where I spend every morning drinking coffee and chatting with customers. Murray, a 74-year divorcee, stops by every morning on his way to work, and gets his usual dose of newspaper, cigarettes, and lottery tickets. As is his practice on Monday mornings, he started off with his list of complaints about his ex-wife, whom he pays alimony, and his lack of success at instant lottery games. I do not know what he did in his earlier life, but now he appears to have a recession-proof job at the Registry of Motor Vehicles, a Massachusetts State Department. He seems to have a pretty carefree life, except on Monday mornings. He lives with a very young woman, who is the reason his wife of 35 years left him. We chatted for a few minutes, before he said, "Got to go to my job... can't be late today!"

By that time, my sickness was gone and soon I was behind my desk, banging away on the keyboard of my computer.

Abdullah Shibli lives and works in Boston.

The Vanished Niltunis

SHAHID ALAM

I first noticed the pair of *niltunis* several years ago perched on a high branch of a tall yellow-and-crimson hibiscus tree in our inner courtyard. I had never seen one before in my life, and did not know what they were called. It was only a year or so later that I came across a feature story, accompanied by photographs, in a Bengali newspaper, which described the life of *niltunis*, and thus got to know its name. There was no mistaking the similarity between the pair in the picture and the pair I had espied. To this day, I do not know them by any other name than '*niltuni*.' They look like hummingbirds, with long, narrow and slightly curved beaks, but the *niltunis* are larger by comparison.

Actually, initially I had thought them to be hummingbirds because of their colour - or, rather, the male's plumage. The feature story had informed me that while the female was rather a drab brown-and-white, the male was adorned with a brilliantly iridescent combination of predominantly dark blue and a contrasting (or, is it complementary?) shade of aquamarine. That contrast between the male and the female tends to be the norm in Nature. The morning sun had heightened the effect of iridescence on the male perched on the branch, and it had looked magical. Tiny fairies hovering around it would have made the picture perfect.

The two used to flit in and out of the tree, until one day I noticed the beginnings of a nest on one of the slender branches, carefully shaded by a couple of large green leaves. From that day on, I noted that the nest grew as the birds wove it into a complete whole. When complete, it looked a modified, miniature version of a weaver bird's (*babui*) nest. Then the vigils began, as one or the other bird - mostly the male - would keep watch in and around the nest. I knew that it now nestled tiny eggs (I only got to see them later, after the birds had abandoned their temporary sanctuary). There was one particular activity, repeated on numerous occasions, that was absorbing. When any unwelcome object, ranging from crows to human beings, ventured into its vicinity, irrespective of the intention, the sentinel would break out into a frenzy of loud, incessant chirping and fly away to a tree (usually the venerable *kamini*) growing a fair distance away from, but close enough to be within sighting range of, the hibiscus tree, and perch on one of its branches, keeping up its screeches and usually frantically flapping its tiny pair of wings. Its intention was clear: Draw the attention of the nasty interloper away from the nest, and towards itself. And it worked! The big birds, bemused or maybe even scared at

the belligerence exhibited, would fly away, probably wondering why the little thing was creating such ruckus. As for *Homo sapiens*, they were amused by it all. Not once were the nest and its precious contents disturbed, let alone harmed, by any external force.

One morning, the silence struck me. No screeches, no fluttering of wings, and no *niltunis*. They had simply vanished. When it was the same the next day, and the day after that, I knew that they had gone, taking their chick or chicks with them. They were chicks, because, when, after a week or so, I had the nest inspected and then brought down, I saw the broken shells of two minuscule eggs, barely larger in size than those of the house lizard, the *tiktiki*. And so ended my first encounter with the *niltunis*.



But there were more - three, in fact, over three successive years. Each year, at around the same time as the first, they returned, to renew the cycle of life all over. But not once did I get to see the chicks, or observe them fly off. I guess they would spread their wings at dawn, while the world was still sleeping. In the first two years of their return, the two (I assumed that the same pair had come back) would settle on the same hibiscus tree, which offered them a

familiar sanctuary and tranquility. Towards the end of the second return, our neighbour's house was torn down to make way for the construction of a multi-storied apartment building. By the time the *niltunis* flew in a third time the construction of the ground floor had begun.

This time they stayed away from the hibiscus tree, which was bearing the full brunt of the construction noise, and instead selected the *kamini*, presumably because the adjoining garage offered some sort of protection against the constant noise and bustle. Then, inevitably, the time arrived when the nest was abandoned, and I marveled at the birds' instinctive sense of being in harmony with their environment. Before the year was out, the building next door had gone up three more stories. And, by the time the birds were scheduled to return, another story had gone up. But the *niltunis* did not turn up that year. Or the next year. Or the year after that. Even if they had not come to the end of their normal life span, I too knew instinctively they would never return. Their sanctuary had been destroyed, sacrificed to the hollow gods of development and modernization, to the growth of Dhaka as a glitzy mega slum.

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TORONTO Journal

SAYEEDA JAIGIRDAR

I am leaving Toronto. After arduous federal government exams (the preparation for which doesn't leave time for anything else) a position in education is mine at last, but at the cost of my beloved city. The new position is in Edmonton, the capital of Alberta, at the western end of Canada and the distance is not inconsiderable - equivalent to roughly the miles between the distance between Dhaka and Tehran. The new position means travel to the Northwest Territories as well as the Pacific province of British Columbia. The spirit of travel in me has re-awakened by the lure of Rocky mountains and the call of the North, but my heart, I fear will remain in my city, the city of Toronto.

As I walked the streets of downtown Toronto a few days back, I followed a well-worn path to the harbor front. Luminato 2009, the festival of arts was in its final show. My last snapshots of the harbour front: A warm wash of sunshine lighting up people's faces, a murmur of low voices... look, look... balloons... a clown! the swish of the waves beside the lake, couples walking hand in hand, different shapes, colours, species, look mummy look, a dog show! Dogs of all sizes trotted by with their noses in the air, taking a pause to sniff an interesting ankle from time to time. The smell of popcorn rose into the warm air and children tugged at hemlines and trousers to reel in their parents towards the vending machines.

We approached a crowd gathered around a little manmade lake. A show is about to start. Mikhaela, my girl, pushed her way through the legs of the crowd, found a tight spot near the front, wriggled enough room for herself, made more room and gestured at me: "Come Mom... there is space for you". The crowd around her turned and looked at me in expectation. I blinked. Do I dare? Squeeze myself through the crowd and into that tiny space?

I did. I took a deep Yoga breath, navigated the crowd and plonked myself into that tight space. Then Mikhaela dropped herself onto my lap and says: "Now I can see better." So much for mother-and-child

The First Lesson

Sunanda Kabir (translated by the poet)

The first lesson in school
I got from you Mastermohai
While practicing handwriting
By slow degrees,
I learnt: 'Always speak the truth'

But on occasion during those times when
You were distracted
Under the scorching mid-day sun of Boishakh
Lost in the labyrinth of Bengali grammar
The sleepy lad has not hesitated to lie

Perhaps tempted by mangoes or marbles
Fished out a few coins from his father's pocket
Yet with wet trembling fingers
Wrote out your second lesson:
'Never take what belongs to others
Without asking'

In my memory that day the assailant *Eklabya*
In the impudence of youth swept away
One by one
The irrefutable proof of your slogans

Time, now elusive and evasive,
On the warm feathers fallen from my body
Leaves its footprints
Yet, no small wonder I still am alive
Nature's melancholy joke
But I have not leave behind any writ
Nor kept any trace of my self
For those who follow later

Today at this great cross-roads
Where your tattered umbrella
Is the same as the king's canopy
Here I stand hunched
Praying for rebirth and pronouncement
The last lesson learnt from you and you alone:
'Be good, and live for mankind!'

Sunanda Kabir is a Bangladeshi poet.

A Farewell to the City

reunions. Children always have ulterior motives... we are the naïve ones. The show starts up! It's the Cirque du Soleil, a world class performance from Montreal, Quebec. They have outperformed other shows in Las Vegas to exuberant crowds. Two groups of dancers wearing masks and skirts that look like the Hawaiian Hula skirts approached the lake. They leapt into the balmy summer night, yelled to each other in a language we didn't understand and plunged like children into the lake where the water only came up to their waist. Some of the water splashed on us and gave us welcome relief from the humidity.

A song filled the twilight hour, a song like no other, from the throats and voices of the dancers, taking us back to a time perhaps before language existed, before symbols were created, this was the way that humans communicated. As night began to fall the dancers donned rich colours and had fire balls in their hands, which they plunged with into the lake -- their movements mimicked the dance of life, ever changing, ever fiery.

We wandered over to the food festival. A myriad of smells, colours, textures and flavors assailed our senses. Where to start? The Thai stall with Thai soup? Or the Caribbean stall for mutton roti? What mouth-watering delicacy lay beyond? My better half scouted the stalls, while we grabbed some chairs around a table. There were hundreds of people around: Torontonians, tourists, retired holidaymakers from other provinces.

And with those images in my mind, I bid the city of Toronto and all its inhabitants farewell and hit the northern trail for the Rockies...

Sayeeda Jaigirdar is an ex inhabitant of Dhaka.



Catfish

Buddhadev Dasgupta
(translated by Khademul Islam)

They swim those catfish the whole night
Beside the dirty drain in the kitchen corner
Inside a small pot

Once or twice they take sudden alarm and startle up
Then sleep again.

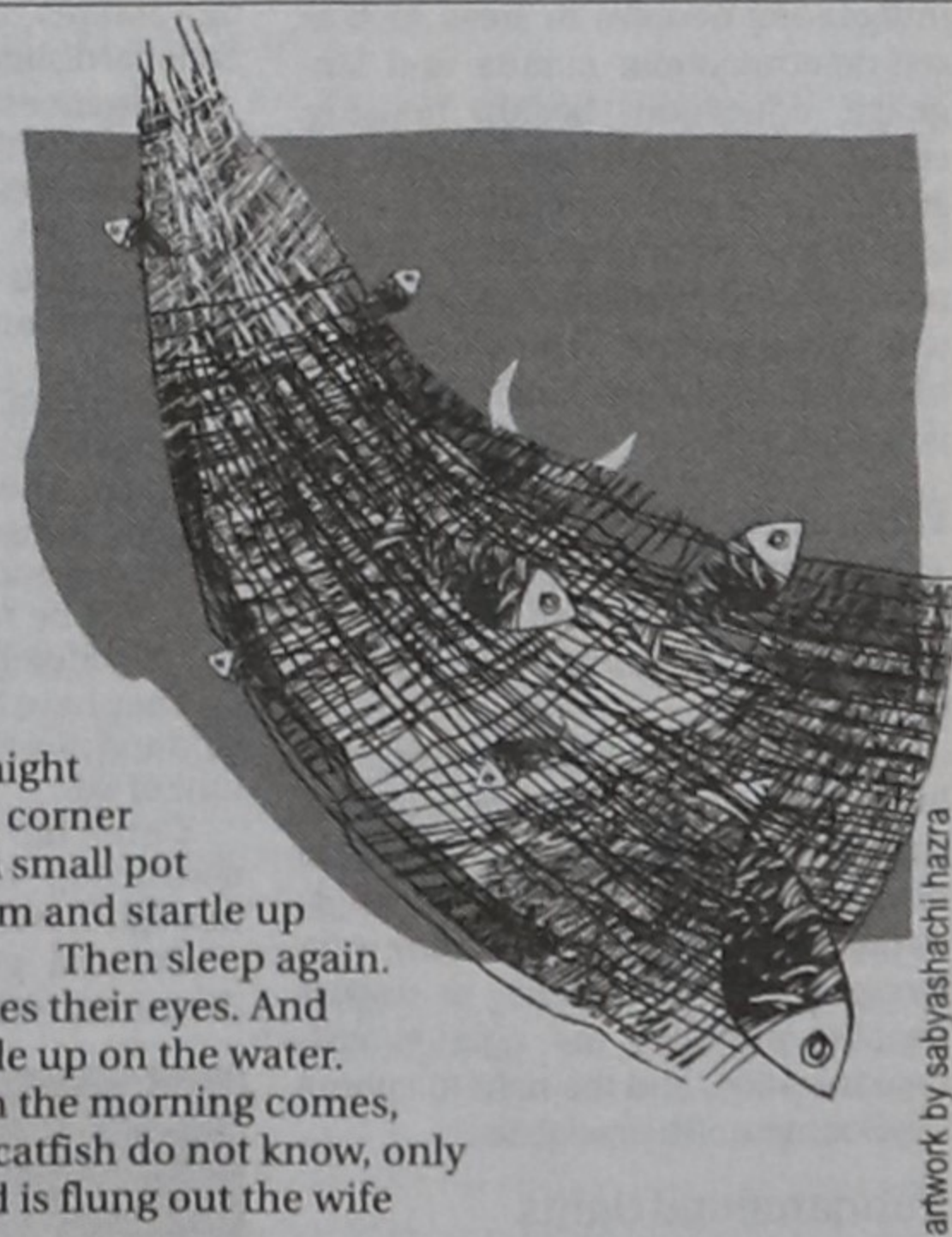
A bewitchingly beautiful dream glazes their eyes. And
The whole night their sorrows bubble up on the water.
Then it's morning, who knows when the morning comes,

The catfish do not know, only
That from beside her angry husband is flung out the wife
Sweet lovely wife; flung out is
Catfish blood from the sharp blade.

From its soft glistening body
One by one the dreams are flung out.
The whole morning, the whole day the house
Fills with their smell
Comes the night again, quiet descends on earth. The
Wife sleeps and dreams of swimming in
The cold blue waters of a distant lake.
Arises then a sudden wind, and
With a crashing noise the kitchen door is thrown open
Wife-catfish startle up alarmed
Behind the catfish are their dreams, in front of them
Are their dreams

And whistling strangely all the while
They pace the whole night from this to that room
In search of that sweet lovely wife.

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.



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