

SHORT STORY

REFLECTIONS

Kiss from a rose

MAHAMUDA RAHMAN

"No one's going to believe how days passed away...how things happened; faces changed...how I took my chances..."
She lives the day feeding on the sea, staring at the waves that come twirling from the end of the world. She keeps mulling over the ripples formed by the retreating tides. They have a strongly familiar pattern. She saw this pattern before --- on the scales of fishes, on the skin of reptiles, on the hard shell of tortoises...
"Nature has its own identical codes scattered everywhere. Codes with similar patterns. Nature, unlike man, likes uniformity... man always goes for individuality, tearing all the social norms and bonds, breaking the communal threads of morals and taboos."

She is on a chance tour with a middle-aged man. She met him one year ago when she was working for an NGO as a freelancer. She slowly got to know about him. His loneliness attracted her. His insomnia gave birth to a lullaby in her heart. And his childlikeness hummed back the mother in her...again.

"He lived a life of an idiot; still believes in ideals, mystical ideals of purity! Ideas of abstinence can still allure someone! Hah! Ascetic life still means something elevating to him. He relishes his life where there is no bodily pleasure. His pride gets swelled by his sacred senses only nourished by books and work...How pathetic!" She smiles to herself indulgently. She loves his innocence. She fabricates his innocence. Every time the very thought of a man being so innocent makes her insides feel warm. She glows with genuine fervor for the man as if the man is one of a very rare, extinguishing species. He is adorable because he is not like others in the city where one cannot see the face of the moon and the breezes are always caught moaning at the close glass-windows. In the city where man lives to earn and the only pleasure he is left with lurks in flesh. "A man with transcendental ideals. Spirituality. Ha ha ha...even today, you can find a man like this!"

She is here with him to cause his fall --- the fall from innocence. She is here with this man to teach him how to kiss a woman.

A few days after she met him, she started to feel "I like him", first. Then the "I like him" melted into a bigger pot; some more colors of ardor and obsession added; and it calcified into something totally abstruse and unintelligible - indefinable. But it definitely glowed with more zeal, burned with more heat than "I like him". She let him in. She let him hold her hand in a dark-red evening. It was not meant to have a goal. It was all for the moment. Yet, she let it happen.

Spring is on the verge of passing away. They start for the sea. She and the man...
In the clear privacy of the cheap hotel room, she first teaches him to kiss. He is a perfect amateur. She smirks. She closes her eyes. She waits. She lets the flood come in. She lets the whispers sing. Her hair reclines against her fair visage like dead leaves. She waits happily. The thing he seems to be fond of is her breasts. At a point she starts to get irritated. Yet, she lets him - out of pity, out of sympathy, out of that indefinable emotion. She lets him there like a mother who loves to pamper her child. Her tenderness mushrooms as he lets her go when she starts fidgeting.

Out of the hotel room is the sea. The gust of breeze. The silence of the vastness. They walk together side by side, treading on the soft, wet sand of the beach. They hold hands. She loves to be treated by the local people as his wife. They are Man and wife. She and her man.
She is happy to the bones. She beams with secret pride and profound contentment. "Ideals are out-of-date in these days. None believes in them anymore... People now hanker after the gain of the moment. They do not cling to anything. He is the only one like an ancient cave, protects the ancient



carvings with a primitive enthusiasm. He is protective. He is sincere. He sticks to his faith. He has faith. He is not like inhabitants of this damned post-modern world." As she continues ruminating over this thought, her whole being inundates with unadulterated bliss for having him by her side.

All morning, noon and afternoon pass playing with the glitters before. The tiny sparkles... innumerable glimmers giggling in the bosom of cosmic beauty. The whole world seems to be dipped into pure ecstasy. The man is sitting beside her. She pats him on the back, kisses his fair forehead. She is the mother, the woman; the one who will teach him, love him, lead him closer to the mystery of the nature...of the forbidden nature, sanctified nature.

She and her man, the man who is different, who is not like others, get down from the bus in the morning. They are back to the city. Away from the cuddle of the loving sun, the shimmering blue, the zephyr, the god of eternal love and tenderness. They climb down in the city with dust, lust, filth and hypocrisy. She knows it well. She knows what the city sucks out from everyone; what the city has transformed them into.

"No matter! The city will need much time to wipe out the rapture I am wrapped up with. It won't be easy to drag out my power, to drain my pleasure, to dry up my pain...I have still much time to smile tight-lipped alone while being engaged in some act of trifle or importance. I have some happiness preserved for me..."

The morning is cold. Blue. The city is yawning. A nervous, shivering yawn as though it was unsure about every possible things on earth. The dawn is hesitant and gloomy. They take a rickshaw to the nearest bus counters. They sit side by side, close to the fire of each other. She conjures her right hand in his left hand. He, her Man turns his head towards her, frowning. She raises her eyebrows archly. "What is it, boy?" Her Man answers- "Feeling a bit uncomfortable... Will you move your hand?"

All fire turns to ashes. All the sun runs away beneath the clouds. All the sky turns pitch black. All the colors wash away by the cold, rigid rain. The flashes keep coming and departing in her memory...

The classmate she had a crush on, is fondling her hands and fingers and fingertips in the empty classroom but when they are out in the campus, he never lets her even touch him...

Her once-upon-a-boyfriend who was prepared to do everything under the shadow, is walking fast leaving her behind when in the sun...

She sees flashes of two-facedness, pretence, fizzing insincerity.
Is the city to blame? Is it the nature to blame? Is it the She who trusts, who relies who loves with earnestness to blame?

She moves her right hand.

Mahamuda Rahman is Copywriter, Asiatic MCL.

When is it going to rain again?

MAHJABEEN KHAN

Today the greenish water is quiet and serene. The reflection of the mango branches laden with blossoms paints a photographic image on the surface, disturbed occasionally only by a light breeze. The tall coconut and "taal" palm tower over one another in a fierce battle to be included in the exquisite collage on the water.

It's a beautiful pond, majestic and compassionate, commanding the love and reverence of everything and anything in its environs. Clumps of water hyacinths with soft mauve flowers drift gently from one side of the pond to the other, round the clock on journeys that never end. Every morning, almost at a designated time, a pair of ducks appear from under the bowing mango branches. Gliding gently into the water they swim towards the centre of the pond. Seconds later, a large flock follows suit, always keeping a respectable distance from the pair. Frolicking and splashing in sheer delight, totally oblivious of the superior attitudes close by, they commence to celebrate the advent of the new day. Soon after yet another group, much younger, almost ducklings, make an unmistakable juvenile and raucous entry, much to the annoyance of the imperial pair. Or so it seems. They join in the rejoicing, half diving with their tails sticking out of the water, pecking at their siblings playfully, fluttering their wings vigorously as though with sheer luck they might just take off and soar into the blues.

The amusement is too tempting to resist and the couple decides to break protocol and join the revelry. Not for long, though. Within less than a minute something gravely goes wrong. Without any prior warning, one of the couple lunges at the youngest members and hounds them until the dazed creatures are completely out of the water. Was it bad behavior, improper language or wrong attire? This happens every day without fail and unless I reincarnate into this feathered species I will never know the story behind this strange phenomenon. Once the youngsters have been dealt with, the couple move away from the common group and head for the far end of the pond. As the sun rises higher the morning session comes to a close and the rigid protocol is installed back once again. The couple waddle up on the opposite side of the pond and the rest slowly exit under the mango branches and disappear on the other side.

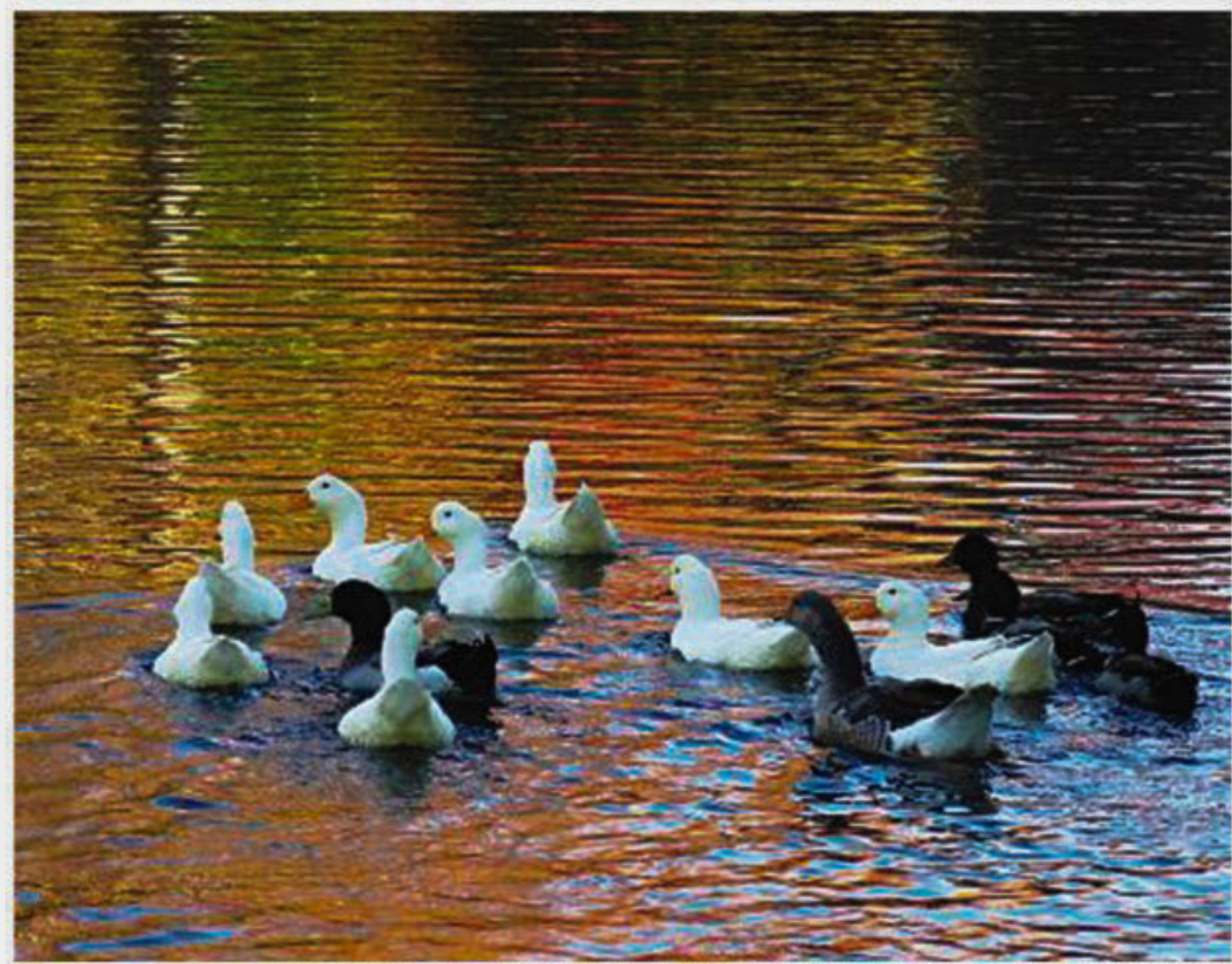
I am fascinated by their social norms. Who are this couple? Why and how do they command so much veneration? Not many people know the difference between a drake and a duck and, without giving in to prejudice, I am so tempted to believe they are both male. Or worse still, are they the patriarch and the matriarch of the family? Why do I sound annoyed? I resent their conceited attitude towards others, especially the little ones. These were tiny little ducklings when I first saw them about six or seven weeks ago. I remember how terrified and anxious they were the first day they came down into the water. They huddled in a corner, too frightened to break away from one another. Fortunately they are growing up fast. The only time I saw all palace regulations swept aside, at least for a considerable length of time, was when the first Baishakhi downpour eventually descended on the pond. I switched off the air conditioner and opened my window to listen to the rain. What I saw was much more than I had bargained for. The enormous raindrops splattered on the pond, stirring up not just ripples but miniature waves. The wild wind blew across the top of the lofty palms, rain trees and the blossom laden mango trees, almost forcing them to submission. Instead they danced madly to the rhythm of the rain. Trying desperately to keep their delicate heads high, the hyacinth flowers held on in agony, not having the luxury of enjoying storms.

But in centre stage were the ducks, all of them. The thunder, lightning, wind and rain formed the most extraordinary orchestra. Complemented with light and sound, not forgetting special effects, the whole scene was like a dream sequence. I stood at my window, mesmerized by this spectacular sight.

Shrieking in ultimate ecstasy, they splashed and fluttered their wings, stirring up a tempest of their very own! Such sudden interaction amongst them had never been witnessed before. All restrictions and inhibitions were washed away and they rejoiced as though this was the one and only rainstorm they would ever be blessed with. They continued with the carousel for as long as they could. Gliding in circles, they sometimes huddled into a tight group, sometimes dispersed, moving away far away from one another. It was like watching a live ballet choreographed to perfection. Very much like *Suan Lake*.

I stood there in a trance for twenty long or more minutes, until the storm leisurely passed on and brought the curtain down. It was still drizzling lightly as they continued to linger on, seeping up the aftermath of the Baishakhi, already quite drunk and content from their revelry.
Today is a bright day. So were yesterday and the day before that. I see pretty yellow butterflies fluttering in the balmy breeze, green dragonflies skimming on the hyacinth flowers. I am in anticipation of something more, although they are blissfully happy, performing their morning rituals. When is it going to rain again?

Mahjabeen Khan is with Bengal Foundation



POETRY

All for you
MADAN SHAHU

Going by the woods in an end-spring night
The moon peeping through the branches from height
The cool breeze reaching the murmur of the leaves to the ear
And the fragrance of flowers to the nostril to bear.
What more I wanted to see, to hear, to feel --
only I missed you beside me
And missed all the worth and senses of satiation to be;
And all that I felt as holding was lost
In the misery of missing you the most.

Why not were you with me, why not? What restrained?
Why couldn't I call you in? What constrained?
Why you couldn't ever again express a desire to be
Except only once when your lowered eyelids implied to me
Perhaps you wanted my company to prolong;
But a fool of me cut it short without knowing how wrong!

That was also the beginning of seeking you
as a cotraveller in my heart,
And it was gradually getting restless in loneliness
you being apart.

Time passed, I also didn't express how full it feels within
when I get you beside
And how hollow it turns just missing you aside.
It's all hollow now --no moon, no breeze, no woods with
murmur of earth and fragrance of heaven;
Come at least in my dreams for moments, and
let things come up soothing for moments
even.

Madan Shahu, music enthusiast and senior journalist, is with The Daily Star

The Wild Mirage
AINON M.

In my world of moonless blurry nights
You give me the gift of impassioned sights
As I touch the lips to sculpt your face
I come alive on verge of prophetic light
A journey unexpected I undertake
Not knowing the reason why

The wind gathers sweet fragrance of jasmine
The warm breeze sets leaves a-flutter
As cool rain clouds you become the bohemian
Quenching thirst of parched mountain
In the gathering summer afternoons
You transform to cool silhouette of serene
In rain I long to see crimson lotus tremble on restless pond
To hear soft raindrops compose enchanting song

I journey with you somewhere deep in woods
I rejoice desert heat in receding moments of day
In sightless existence I feel the poignant sun ray
I become shimmering dew of twilight mist
Caressing gently nape of your swan neck
I touch the wind that weaves through your hair
In still mind I hear your cosmic laughter so fair

To be with you is to hear recital of the Quran
To become entrenched in Torah's song
To blend into the sound of hymn in church
A soundless prayer you are in my spiritual search

With you I transport to mellowed passion
I embrace you to hold the moment to eternity
As guiding star you take me to rim of divinity
Thus the soft rhythm of your heart I foretell
Or is it the beat of mine in a quiet citadel?...
Ainon M. writes from Carbondale, Illinois, USA

LITERARY NOTES

In a writer's company...

SHAKIL RABBI

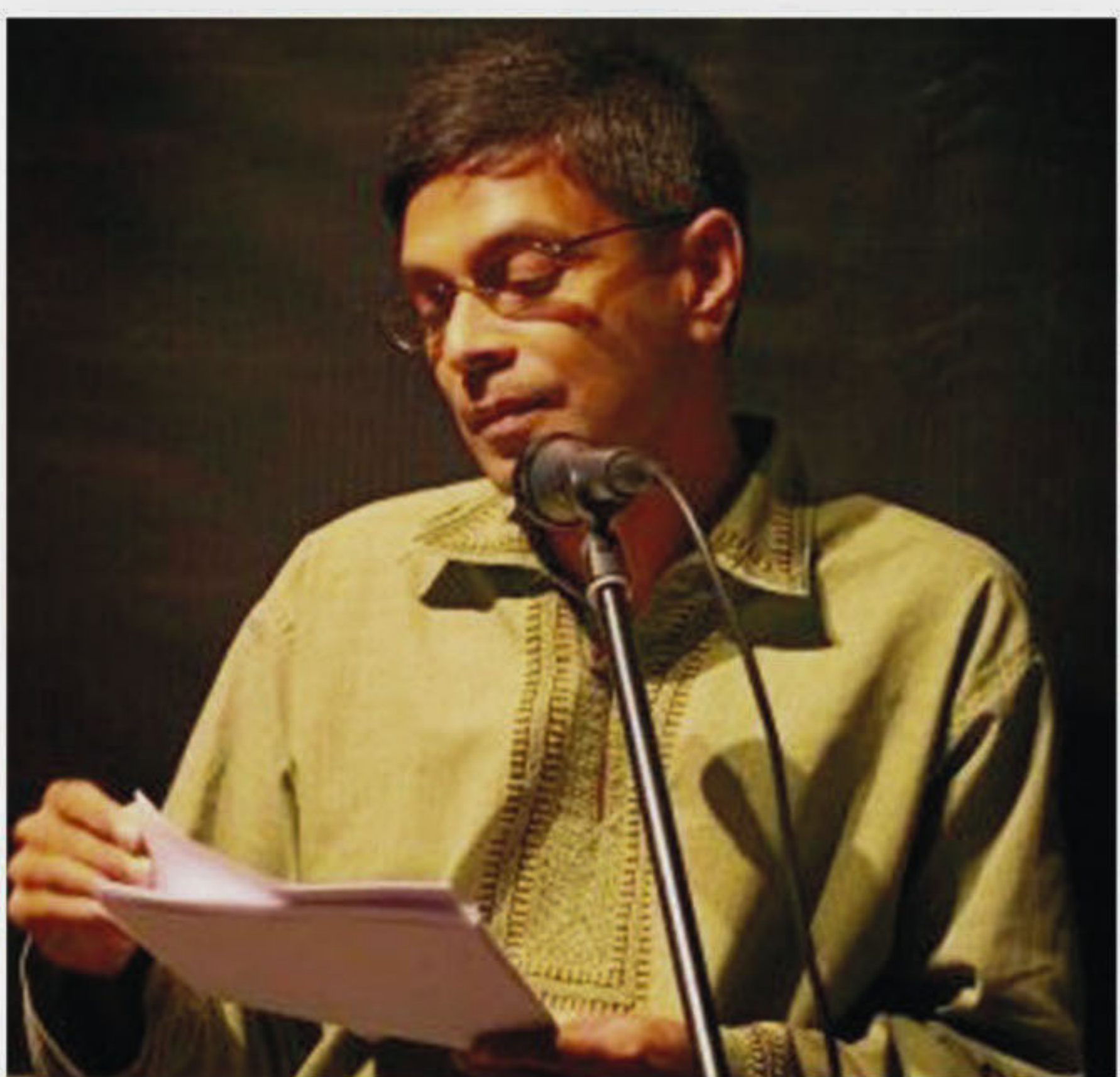
He came in quietly, a man slight of frame and bespectacled. Some of the other participants among whom were academics, independent writers, editors of local English dailies, members of local reading groups were talking about potential points of discussion in a corner. Some were nervous about what they could say about a book before its author.

As part of the Department of English and Humanities (DEH), I was thrilled that our department would host 'An Evening with an Author', a reading and discussion of *Killing the Water* with Mahmud Rahman. A new collection of short stories published by Penguin India, *Killing the Water*, had garnered widespread positive reviews, and even caused an admiring Indian eye to momentarily turn to Bangladeshi storytellers writing in English.

It was almost a coup, the fact that we managed to make the evening happen at all. Rahman had launched the book just a week earlier at Omni and would be flying back to the US in a couple of days. But the man made it much easier than I thought it would have been. When I first approached Mahmud Rahman, Mahmud bhai as I have gotten used to calling him, about doing a reading and discussion of *Killing the Water* at ULAB, his reply was an open and soft-spoken, "Just let me know and I will try to be free then."

The setting for it could not have been better. It was late afternoon on a Thursday. We were going host it in ULAB's campus B seminar room, a glass-walled suite on the roof of the building, high above the congestion of the Dhaka streets that choke out all things humane and civil. Rows of potted plants sprawled across the building's rooftop garden, some large and majestic, curtain the outsides of the clear glass walls.

I had first met the writer a year earlier. But I had heard about him much earlier. When people told me about him they would say that he was the man coming out with a collection



of short stories through Penguin India. People in Bangladesh writing in English mentioned that he was a great writer, someone who would do something special. The buzz around his name was like the unspoken wish around the candles of a child's birthday cake.

Even though I already knew him, I had always been apprehensive about asking him about his book before that evening. The timing never seemed right. I never felt it proper to ask him about the stories in the book, assumed that it would be too intrusive. But at ULAB I felt that I had been foolish for

ever thinking that Rahman would be reluctant to talk about his book, that he would too sensitive about it. He was completely open to any topic raised by the participants and spoke at length about everything we wanted to discuss.

Mahmud Rahman opened with a reading of an excerpt from 'Kerosene', an allegorical story based on communal violence and atrocities. He explained that he wrote 'Kerosene' after reading Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. After reading that novel, which allegorizes apartheid South Africa, he decided

that his story about communal violence would work better if it were fashioned similar to Coetzee's prize-winning novel. He added that people around him both his friends and the editors of the book had wanted him to make the story more literal and asked him to set 'Kerosene' in Bangladesh. But he was adamant about sticking to an allegorical style because he thought it would be best for the story. He also explained that he had got the names for the races in the story from real life: the name *Demon* was from the independence war posters that decried the Pakistanis and *Running Dogs* was the coinage used by Asian communist parties for Western-backed Asian governments in the seventies.

The author also spoke about the process that went into the stories in *Killing the Water*. During the conversations that followed, he said that he had to fight against the generalizations of his editors a lot of the time. But despite all the difficulties faced in working with the editors, he said he had benefitted tremendously from their feedback and comments. To him, the main task of writing, the point where the stories became real, was the process of rewriting and so editors were crucial. He said that he was very happy that he had a good editorial team in *Killing the Water*. It gave him a lot of great suggestions, many of which he found invaluable during the rewriting process.

As we talked about all these literary points we forgot completely about the time. We tried to keep the evening going none of us wanted to stop. When we all finally got up and it came to an end, many of us straggled around in the rooftop garden, sipping tea and munching on our complimentary *shingaras*, reflecting on the evening and feeling that we had learned a lot from the author and the man, who I felt was as humane and interesting as the voice that runs through the stories in his book.

Shakil Rabbi is Lecturer, Department of English and Humanities, ULAB.