

Of ducks and sun-filled afternoons



SAYEEDA JAIGIRDAR

We sat on the edge of a man-made lake somewhere in the north of the city of Edmonton. It was a spectacular late summer afternoon...almost timeless...the temperatures touching a balmy 25 degree centigrade. Lake Beaumaris is a storm water lake and brown hued ducks were all around, diving for little silvery fishes and critters off the surface of the lake. We spotted a couple of grey Canadian geese too. There was a ripple and a flurry of sorts, all around the water as the creatures played in the afternoon sun, content in themselves. The grass felt firm under me and I inched my feet out of my

sandals and unto the mossy earth. It pushed itself back. I surveyed my toes with a certain amount of approval. Suddenly, a couple of waddling ducks ventured out of the water and headed towards me. I was startled! Surely my toes were not on their gourmet meal for the evening! Perish the thought of toe eating ducks! So much for my wary human thoughts! They waddled quietly by, silently acknowledging our creature presence and the absence of any morsels of food. They made a leisurely circle all around us and headed back into the lake in single file making a minimal splash in the effort of sliding into the storm water lake. Ah! What is storm water? Storm water is the water that runs down the street when it's raining or has snowed. Storm water enters holes

in the gutter called storm drains. Water that flows down the street when it's not raining, like when one washes ones car or waters ones lawn, is called urban runoff. All of this flows from drains and pipes into man-made lakes. An environmental effort on the part of the city.

At first sight, the lake is beautiful, but then one begins to notice the signs all around saying that swimmers are not allowed due to pollutants in the water. My little girl wanted to dip her feet into the lake but I forbade her to. I could see how my caution took away her primal instincts. I peeped into the lake and saw little plants under the water. These plants were natural water purifiers. I remembered them from the ponds of Bangladesh. So perhaps the fish and ducks were safe after all.

As I gazed at the ducks, I recalled a cat that had strayed into my house the other day. It had a bell around its neck that tinkled as it moved and so I knew that it must have an owner. As it sailed into my kitchen, I noticed its ease of manner, similar to that of the ducks, confident of its environment and displaying no fear or ill ease in our presence. I was, on the other hand, alert, primed for action, an amygdala*-driven ripple through the nervous system creating a fight or flight response. And that too for an innocent cat! Other folks around me were more responsive to the little creature and responded to its need for creature contact.

As urbanites, we tend to detach ourselves from Nature and it is this very act that is at the root of our fears and our little cautionary messages to our young. Why aren't children allowed to wallow in the mud like they used to, twenty years ago? Why cannot little Nasima or even little Betty carry a little earthworm home with her in her pocket? Why not risk that swim or a toe dip? But there I was, the careful parent telling my daughter, "It's time to go home..." when I saw her venture too close to the water. Children and ducks do not understand the importance of time.

It is the fearlessness and perhaps the ignorance of the creatures around me that I envy on this sun-filled afternoon. As glaciers melt and the ozone layer widens, the ducks continue to bask in their eternal sunlight of happiness, while we mortal beings fret and fritter about our living earth and about the nature of time itself. We are the only beings on earth that have divided something as infinite as time into units, into atoms and molecules and then try to churn it up into globules of happiness, not knowing all the while that "They also serve who only stand and wait".

* The amygdala, an almond-sized and -shaped brain structure, has long been linked with a person's mental and emotional state.

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NON-FICTION

Memories of 1968

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

There are the years that give a shake to your sensibilities. And these are years you recall with something of fondness, with sometimes a dash of sadness. In 1968, we were young, we were in our teens, and we watched in amazement the way the world around us as also the world of which we were a part moved on, in breeziness that left us worried about the future to be. For those of us who remember 1968, it was a time when the world changed. We changed, all of us, enough to develop new perspectives on life and politics around us.

By the time 1968 dawned, we were yet caught in the glow set off by Christian Barnard's pioneering move in the region of human heart transplants in late 1967. For the first time in history, it was indeed possible for one individual's heart to be placed in the body of another and so let life move on. It was an amazing feat. And yet in 1967 came news of immense sadness: Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt had disappeared into the sea, where he had gone to take a dip. Death, we reasoned, came in the strangest of ways. And yet it was a mite hard to let the thought sink in that even a prime minister could be claimed by the waves. And it was not merely Holt's death that left us traumatised as 1968 approached. We remembered too the Arab defeat in the June 1967 war; and we had not forgotten the way three American astronauts were incinerated inside their spacecraft even as they prepared for lift-off at Cape Kennedy.

But it was 1968 that was to prove seminal in our lives. The year changed perceptions in the West, certainly. But those of us who inhabited the eastern regions of the globe were no less subjected to a transformation of thought, not just because of what the West was going through but also because of events at home, and around it. In 1968, as the Agartala conspiracy case exploded and Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan began to reach out towards a crescendo, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto told Pakistanis he would challenge President Ayub Khan at the presidential elections scheduled for 1970. We cheered him, little knowing that much more would happen that year, events that would leave our ideas about ourselves changed altogether. By the time 1968 would end, young people (of whom yours truly was one) would come round to the thought that it was not Bhutto but Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who mattered in Pakistan. For Bengalis, the knowledge that a powerful Bengali

politician could shake up the entire state of Pakistan was thrilling. It was in 1968 that the spirit of Bengali nationalism began to seep into us. We have never looked back since.

In 1968, things were shaping up horrendously in Indonesia. President Sukarno was no more on the scene; his foreign minister Subandrio was in jail, a sentence of death hanging over him. It was General Suharto who ran the show, which made western governments and multinationals happy, for they could now exploit the country's resources at will. Foreign Minister Adam Malik went around extolling the virtues of the new regime. In Algeria, Colonel Houari Boumeddiene, having seized power from Ahmed Ben Bella in 1965, ruled in undisputed manner. But it was the Soviet leadership, the troika of Brezhnev, Kosygin and Podgorny, that sent shock



waves around the world when it decided to send in Warsaw Pact tanks to quell the Prague Spring earlier set in motion by new Czechoslovak leader Alexander Dubcek. That was in August. The collapse of the reforms in Czechoslovakia, the appearance of a hapless, dishevelled Dubcek before the Soviet leaders in Moscow were depressing. Suddenly, it was all a going back to the crushing of the Hungarian revolt of 1956 and the execution of the popular Imre Nagy.

The desert storms of 1968 claimed the life of the American civil rights leader Martin Luther King in April. Two months later, it was Robert F. Kennedy, confident as he sought the Democratic nomination for the White House, who was cut down by Sirhan Bishara Sirhan in Los Angeles. For many of us, a terribly sad experience was in knowing that Eugene McCarthy, the poet who was also the politician who had given Lyndon Johnson a drubbing at the New Hampshire primary earlier that year, would not be his party's nominee for the presidency. That honour went to Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who in turn went down to defeat at the hands of Richard Nixon in November. In a lot of ways, Nixon's triumph, eight years after he had narrowly lost the presidency to John F. Kennedy, tasted sweet for those of us who had watched the way he had planned his comeback. Watergate was still years away, but in 1968 we prayed for Richard Nixon. The Lord of the Worlds answered our prayers. And it was Creation that the astronauts of Apollo 8 went back to as they rounded the moon on Christmas Eve in 1968. Each of the three men took turns reading from the Bible. As they watched the earth rise from out of the dark and remembered God, we in our little homes down below thought we understood a little more the roots that bound us to the heavens.

In 1968, protesters died in Mexico; India busied itself with a green revolution under Indira Gandhi; Biafra under Odumegwu Ojukwu struggled to be free of Nigeria; Pierre Trudeau became Canada's prime minister; China was in the turmoil of its Cultural Revolution and Charles de Gaulle was nearly brought down by students in France.

It was an exciting time to live in, for it was a year sweeping in its dimensions and profound in a demonstration of its convictions.

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SHORT STORY

Man in the mirror

SYED MAQSUD JAMIL

He wore his full sleeve shirt over his grey trousers. There was nothing remarkable about his features. But his long hair parted in the middle and ran down to his shoulders a trend of the times. A man on the other side of thirty that he was, his glasses had a thick black frame, giving him an intellectual air. He was holding a cigarette between his fingers and he smoked with hauteur. It was a time of defiance. He had assembled to submit advertising campaigns. It was a collection of men that walked in the cloud. His men hung around him and prattled on. He lazed in his silence and spoke only when talked to. Soon the agencies started to submit their presentations and they did it with great relish. When his agency was to speak he curtly observed that since this was not a trade fair, he would prefer an exclusive opportunity. His wish was granted and it surprised me. I was a neophyte to the trade. And I got curious to know who this brash gentleman was. I was buffeted by a foreign name that showed his baptism. I naturally did not proceed any further.

Years passed. My ire was forgotten. It was an association meeting. He was there. A letter was drafted where I contributed a little. He took up the letter, narrowed his eyes and observed that articulation did not need a profusion of words. But this time he was quick to smooth my ruffled pride finding redeeming elements in the letter. Soon he befriended me. From then on it was time for me to discover the man. Our contacts grew. The man in the mirror was taking shape. He started giving me the leeway to know the man. I found that he was a free spender. He quoted an advertising titan in support, sermonising that the more you spend the eager you become to earn more. He was not to win me over and by that I did not prosper.

The ethos he followed was that of an advertising man. For him there were far greater considerations to pursue in society. And he pursued them compulsively, devoting the latter half of the day and the evening to the pursuit. He fraternized with the members of the media and frequented the watering hole of the social circuit. In spite of it he did not have a life of his own. But he had a tale that everybody knew. The girl he loved had found another man and married him. The marriage soon ended and she found another man. That was that and there was not much to it.

When I started to discover him his business was on the decline. His room was spartan. He was reclining on the mattress laid on the floor. His head with shaggy hair streaming down the neck rested on his palm. There was a chest of drawers behind the mattress. A half empty bottle of liquor and two wine glasses were at his side. 'Debuda has come to life'. His wistful eyes eyed the amber liquid before he brought the wine glass to his lips. With every gulp he was closing his eyes and the amber liquid coursed down his throat. It was as if a sultry thirst had been quenched. A copy of Arthur Hailey's Airport was near the bottle with the circulating air leafing through its pages. The fan made a whirring sound. The midday sun flooded the room with unsolicited light. The attendant was summoned to serve tea and prepare lunch. By that time he had travelled to Karachi. The time was the early sixties. He was young and serving with the radio. There was a guest from the east, an intellectual with authority on folk songs. The matronly lady was for him to take care of. He produced the programme on Bangla folk songs, attending to the lady as best as he could. She was deeply touched by the care and attention she received. The young man did not have any relation to board up with in Dhaka. 'Whenever you come to Dhaka be our guest'. Destiny would do the rest.

It was summer in Dhaka. The krishnachuras were in bloom and the stillness of summer was scripting a tale. He was in love. The girl, the eldest in the brood of five, was a sprightly maiden. She had a chirpy voice, intense eyes and a firm nose. Her small mouth always puckered. She understood that he was in love with her. But she still had the flippancy of a teenage girl and was yet to learn constancy. The entire brood took an instant liking to his modish ways. For both of them it was their first love. He had a well cultivated mind that wanted to script love with his own thoughts. To him she was the teenage Lydia of Chekhov's The House With An Attic...an Eliza Doolittle, the common florist girl to make her his own. But she was still a pert girl. The time came for him to take up a job at a foreign advertising agency. He left and she left him. She plunged into the frivolity of college life. There she found her man. And she married the man she found. It was a turbulent time and the marriage was tempestuous. The marriage ended and she found yet another man. A man given to creative pursuits. She was getting into marriage and out of it.

Years later the epilogue of the tale took form. She married her first love. He gave his marriage a king's treatment. There had to be a bottle, for he loved it as he loved his lady. And he got a new set of wine glasses too. His taste was as lofty as his love. The marriage lasted three months. That was a lifetime for him. She returned to her last husband.

It was destined to be a tragic tale. She ended her life and he withered away in early death. The man in the mirror has been brought back to life.

Syed Maqsud Jamil is a writer and critic.

...from Rabindranath Tagore

TRANSLATION: FAKRUL ALAM

Amare Tumi Ashesh Korecho

Making me inexhaustible
Gives you pleasure;
Exhausting me fully,
You fill me till I am born anew
Taking the little flute that I am,
You cross hills and river banks,
Evoking endless tunes from me!
Who could I tell all this to?

In your everlasting caress
My heart loses sight of limits
And in immense bursts of joy
Song lyrics rise in me.

You give me what I can take
With my hands, night and day,
Years pass but there is no end
To what I receive from you!

Tumi Jokhon Gaito Bolo

When you ask me to sing
My heart swells with pride
As I look intently at you
My eyes moisten with tears
All that is hard and bitter in me
Melts into heavenly music
All my prayers and thoughts
Take wings like merry birds.

You are content with my songs
I know they please you.
They admit me to your company
The One I can't reach through thought
Accepts me through my songs!
My songs make me forget myself
And let me call my Lord my friend.

Tumi Kemon Kore Gaan Koro

O wise one, how do you sing so well?
I listen in amazement, completely
enthralled!
Your melodies light up the world
And waft across heavens,
Melting stones, driving everything in
the way,
Carrying along with them heavenly
music.

Though the tunes keep eluding my
voice
I feel like singing in that superb vein

What I would like to say get stuck
And my soul cries out, defeated!
What trap have you ensnared me
into?
Your music has me fully in its thrall!

Amar Shokol Ange

Your touch makes all of me
Feel holy, O Life-giver;
Night and day, I keep you in view
And try to stay pure.
O Truth giver, I try to remind myself,
In everything that I do,
That your presence in my mind
Should guide all my thoughts,
And keep all untruths away.

Because you are in my heart
I can curb all evil and deceit
And check everything hateful
Because you are rooted in me
My love will bloom and stay pure
Knowing you are my strength
I'll strive to reveal you in my work.

Tumi Ektu Kebol Boshte

Just let me sit near you awhile
And indulge me a little
Any work I have left over
I'll finish later
If I can't see you
My heart won't rest
And I'll drift
In a boundless ocean

Spring murmurs eagerly

At my window this day,
The listless bee buzzes on
Circling the garden lawn
This is a day for reposing
By myself, of keeping
You always in my view
All I'd like to do this day
Is dedicate my life to you
Singing in quiet repose.

Chhinno Kore Lou He More

Pluck me this moment
And delay no longer
Let me not lie in the dust forlorn
Let me be part of
The garland you'll put on
My fate, I keep hoping,
Is to be picked by you alone!
Extract me, pluck me out,
Remove me from all doubt!

Who knows when day will end?
Who knows when night will fall?
Who knows when the time to pray,
And call upon you, may slip away?
Take me, whatever colors I gather,
Choose me, whatever scent I put on,
Make me part of your prayer offerings
Let me serve you any way I can,
Extract me, pluck me out,
Remove me from all doubt!