A long time ago, when BTV was the only channel available, I remember watching a drama where some teenagers were planning a picnic on 21st February. They had been given the day off from college and decided to take advantage of the beautiful spring weather. Overhearing these plans, their politically conscious uncle gave them a stern scolding and told them to go read their history books. Shame-facedly, they walked away. The story ended.

I was in elementary school, happily staying up past my bedtime because the next day was a government holiday. Upon hearing the uncle, I felt guilty too and quickly switched off the television. I can't remember what I did the next day. I may have worn black and walked around with a sad face.

I still wear black on Ekushey but it isn't a simplistic day of mourning anymore. After UNESCO declared 21st February as International Mother Language Day, the attire and attitudes have become a mix of black, white and red. We mourn the loss of so many lives during the Language Movement. We remember our martyrs with pride and respect. And we celebrate the beauty of our mother-tongue by holding handwriting competitions, poetry recitations, book festivals, etc. The story doesn't have to end sadly; it should go on triumphantly.

The following poems, taken from an anthology of poems originally published by Bangla Academy, are thus chosen to invoke careful thought. We know where we started from. Do we know where we are headed? Today's SLR is dedicated in memory of the martyrs of the Language Movement, 1952.

MUNIZE MANZUR



FIRST POEM ON EKUSHEY

Mahbub Ul Alam Chowdhury

I have not come, where they laid down their lives

Under the Krishnachura trees, to shed tears. have not come, where endless patches of blood Glow like so many fiery flowers, to weep.

Today I am not overwhelmed by grief Today I am not maddened with anger Today I am only unflinching

in my determination.

The child who will nevermore get a chance to rush into his father's arms, The housewife who, shielding the lamp With her sari, will nevermore wait By the door for her husband, The mother who will nevermore draw To her breast with boundless joy

her returning son, The young man who, before collapsing

On the earth, tried again and again To conjure before his eyes the vision

of his beloved,

In their name, In the name of those brothers and sisters, In the name of my language, Nourished by the heritage of a thousand years,

In the name of the language in which am accustomed to addressing my mother, In the name of my native land, I say, I have come today,

Here on the open grounds of the university, To demand their death by hanging, The death of those who killed My brothers and sisters indiscriminately.

I have not come here to weep for them Who gave their lives under Ramna's

sun-scorched Krishnachura trees For their language,

Those forty or more who laid down their lives For Bangla, their mother tongue, For the dignity of a country's great culture, For the literary heritage of Alaol, Rabindranath, Kaikobad and Nazrul, For keeping alive the bhatiali, baul, Kirton and the ghazal,

Those who laid down their lives For Nazrul's unforgettable lines:

"The soil of my native land is purer than the purest gold."

Forty budding lives fell

like innumerable Krishnachura petals On Ramna's soil.

In the husks of the seed Sprouting there from, I can see Endless drops of blood,

The blood of young Rameshwar and Abdus Salam, The blood of the most brilliant boys of the university. I can see each drop of blood

Shining on Ramna's green grass like burning flames, Each boy a piece of diamond, Forty jewels of the university,

Who, had they lived, would have become The most precious wealth of the country, in whom Lincoln, Rolland, Aragon and Einstein had found refuge, In whom had flourished some of the

Most progressive ideals of this century's civilization.

We have not come here to shed tears Where forty jewels sacrificed their lives. We have not come, either, to plead For our language to the killers Who arrived with their rifles loaded, With orders to shoot our brothers and sisters. We have come to demand the hanging Of the tyrants and the murderers. We know that our brothers and sisters were killed, That they were mercilessly shot,

That one of them was perhaps called 'Osman' just like you, That perhaps one of them had a clerk for his father Just like you, or that one's father was growing Golden crops in some remote village of East Bengal, Or was a government functionary.

Today those boys could be living just like you or me. Perhaps one of them had his wedding day fixed Just like me.

Perhaps one of them had left on his table, Just like you, his mother's letter Received a moment ago, Hoping to read it when he got back From the procession he went out to join. Those boys had harboured concrete dreams

in their chests, And they were killed by the bullets Of the cruel tyrants. In the name of those deaths I demand that those who wanted To banish our mother-tongue be hanged,

I demand that those who ordered The killings be hanged, I demand that the traitors

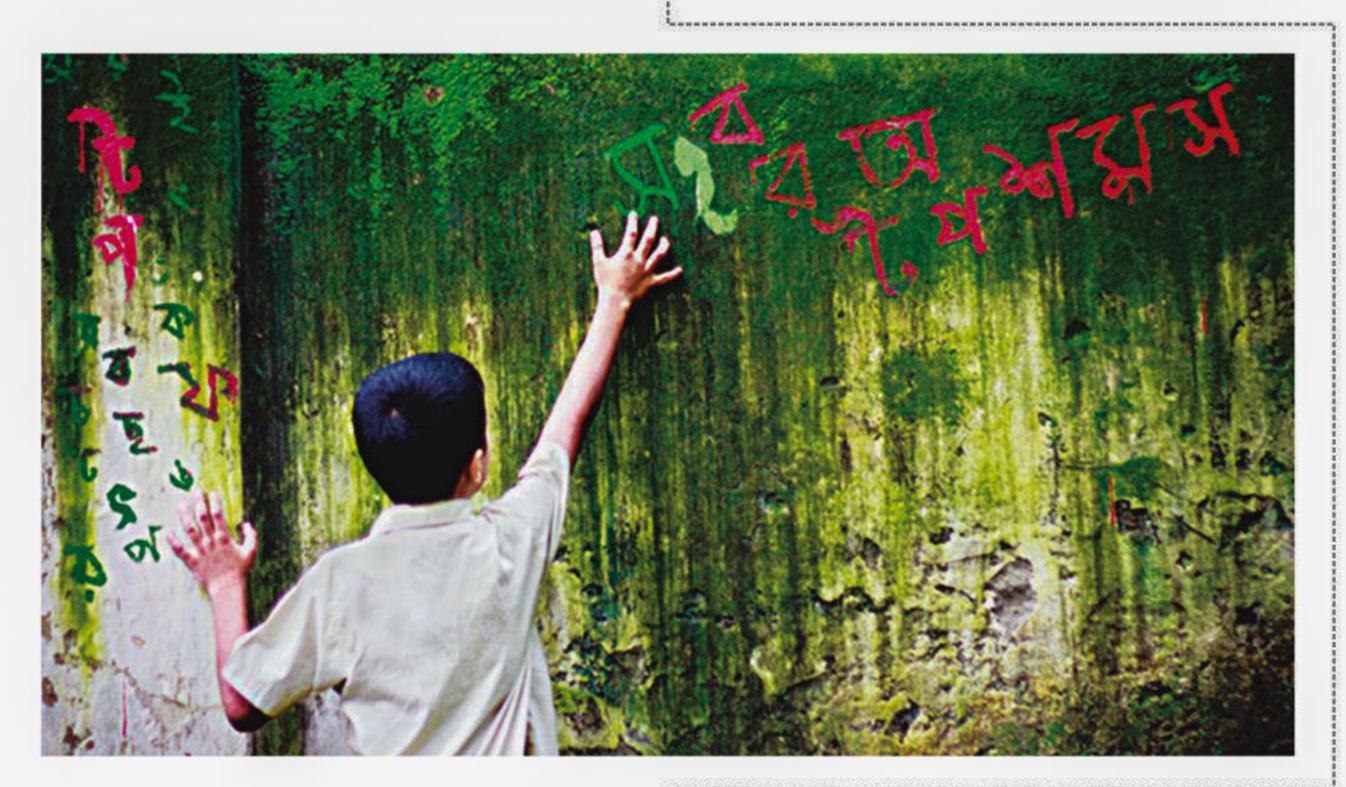
Who climbed to the seats of power Over the dead bodies of my brothers and sisters be hanged.

I want to see them tried and shot as convicted criminals On that very spot in this open field.

Those first martyrs of the country, Those forty brilliant boys of the university, Each of them had dreams of building A quiet home in the bosom of this earth With his wife, children and parents. They dreamed of analysing The scientific theories of Einstein with greater depth, They dreamed of finding ways To put the atomic power to man's service In the cause of Peace. They dreamed of writing a poem

More beautiful than Tagore's "The Flute Players".

O my martyred brothers, The spot where you laid down your lives Will continue to glow Even after a thousand years.



The marks of your blood from that soil, Although procession after procession Will one day converge here And shatter its vague silence. The tolling of the university bells Will daily announce the historic hour of your deaths, Even if one day a violent storm Erupted and shook the building's very foundation. Whatever came to pass The brightness of your names as hallowed martyrs Would never grow dim. The cruel hand of the murderers Can never throttle your long cherished hopes. Some day we shall surely win And hail the advent of justice and fair play. O my dead brothers, On that day, your voices, The strong voices of Freedom,

No footprints of civilization can wipe out

Will soar from the depths of silence. The people of my country, on that day, Will surely, from the gallows, hang Those tyrants and murderers. On that day, your hopes will shine like flames In the joy of victory and sweet vengeance.*

*This poem was written at 7:00pm on 21st February

Translated by Kabir Chowdhury



SUCH A WONDERFUL DAY

Sufia Kamal

Such a wonderful day today, Nobody laments for the dead, none Fears death's grim face. A strange gleam Lights the weary body and face; in each footstep The glittering light of determination is aglow. As if they have signed their names

in Bengali

On their own death-sentence; "I have taken up my mother from the dust to my bosom."

There have been Salam, Barkat and thousands of unknown names,

They were their father's only hope, their mother's Last possession, someone's partner for life Or a lone brother of some hapless sister -They are no more now.

They are no more? No, that's not true! They are here in the sky and wind Very close to our hearts.

They are in the marching feet of the processions, With the undying song of death in their throats, In the fiery looks of the angry protesters. Ekushey is now mixed with blood and

the Bengali tongue. It is now unconquerable by any.

ALL THE PEOPLE

Sikander Abu Zafor

All the people got united in a second,

Ekushey February is a fearless Journey

Ekushey February is a united being

Of the conscience-stricken egoist,

She is much changed now, alas!

The unseen magic hands of treachery

Is now nothing but a corpse of vows.

A mis-spent tear of people's pride,

Translated by K. Ashraf Hossain

A pale history of an atrophied urge.

Stifles her; the black vampire of prudence

A shrouded giant stalks the stage of sorrow

Ekushey February is a mere silent memory

Of rage, of hatred,

(His name is foresight)

A strong faith in life

A great popular upsurge

Who starts at the sound of falling leaves.

Ekushey February is the tearing explosion

With her black flags, posters and blood-red

On the road of consciousness,

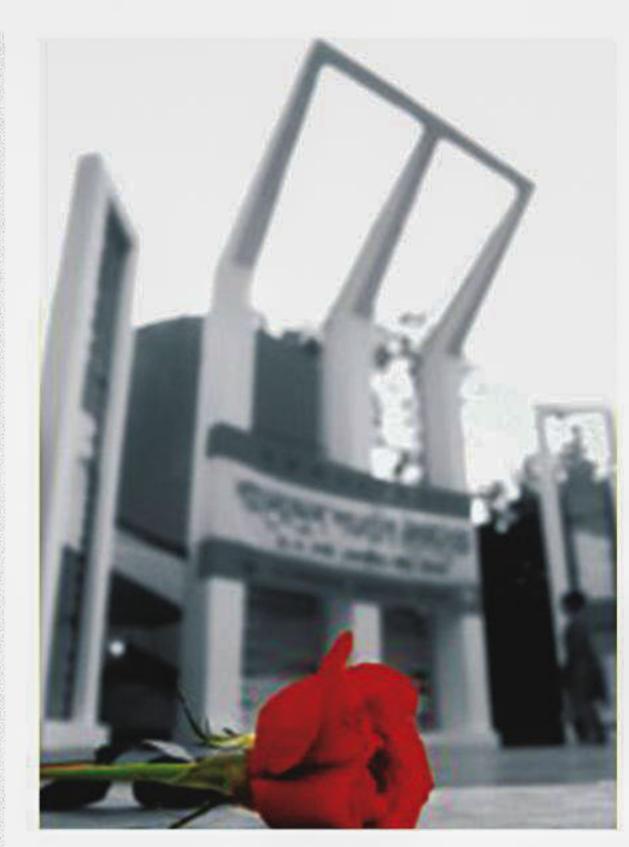
With a new-born pledge.

They anointed their sinews, ribs and muscles

The history of the land pulsates on the horizon

Ekushey February is written with the sleepless terror

Translated by K. Ashraf Hossain



SUPRIYO

Kaisul Huq

Supriyo, my son, is too small To understand anything; Yet he too, wants to join in the chorus of Ekushey. With his tiny hands Wants to hang the bright posters of the day On the house wall.

He comes running or still he stands And golden Hope dances on his two firm hands.

Translated by K. Ashraf Hossain

Men Are Not Rivers

Mohammad Nurul Huda Men are not rivers, yet in their hearts

Burns the raging thirst of rivers. The youthful blood that was spilled in Fifty-Two With its tidal thirst suddenly becomes A river of humanity across the Dravidian delta; See how on its alluvial soil is slowly built An un-Aryan homeland, like a cascading stream The habitat of a vernal race. The language dearest to man lives on In the sound of the rivers.

Translated by Syed Manzoorul Islam

COME

of time.

of a million men.

scribblings of tears.

spreads its wings;

of the past,

every year!

Syed Shamsul Huq

Come, let us wrest our liberty, The liberty to speak, The liberty to place one letter to the right of another And make up words, The liberty to sing a hymn to life, The liberty to make a glowing utterance, Full of meaning and reason. Come, let us wrest with our strong hands The liberty to say something one can see and touch,

Something like flowers or birds or ships. Come, let us utter the word "Liberty". No, no prayer at the altar of the Goddess of Muse,

No, no gift from far away.

No lonely dedicated study. Nor any solitary struggle within one's inner self. Now at this hour

I call all my senior poets, I call all those who think and feel like me, All the thunder that lies hidden in my bones,

All the venom that resides in my hatred, All the love that breathes in my soul, All the hurt that festers in my heart. I call them all. Now at this hour

of pitch-black darkness. I say, "Come poet; come love; heal my wounds.

Turn men into poets. Come, turn poets into men. Come, come, come.

Translated by Kabir Chowdhury