

EDITOR'S
NOTE

This week we welcome back the ever-prolific poet and academic Kaiser Haq tracing lines of connection between the wireless and the lyrical. Are there any? Read on and judge for yourself. Recently Dhaka dwellers were treated to a two-day literary conclave on dissent. If you missed it, the synopsis is here for your review. And while on dissent, three poems with unusual perspectives are presented today. Agree with them or not, we hope they will give you at least a cause to pause. Enjoy the read!

MUNIZE MANZUR

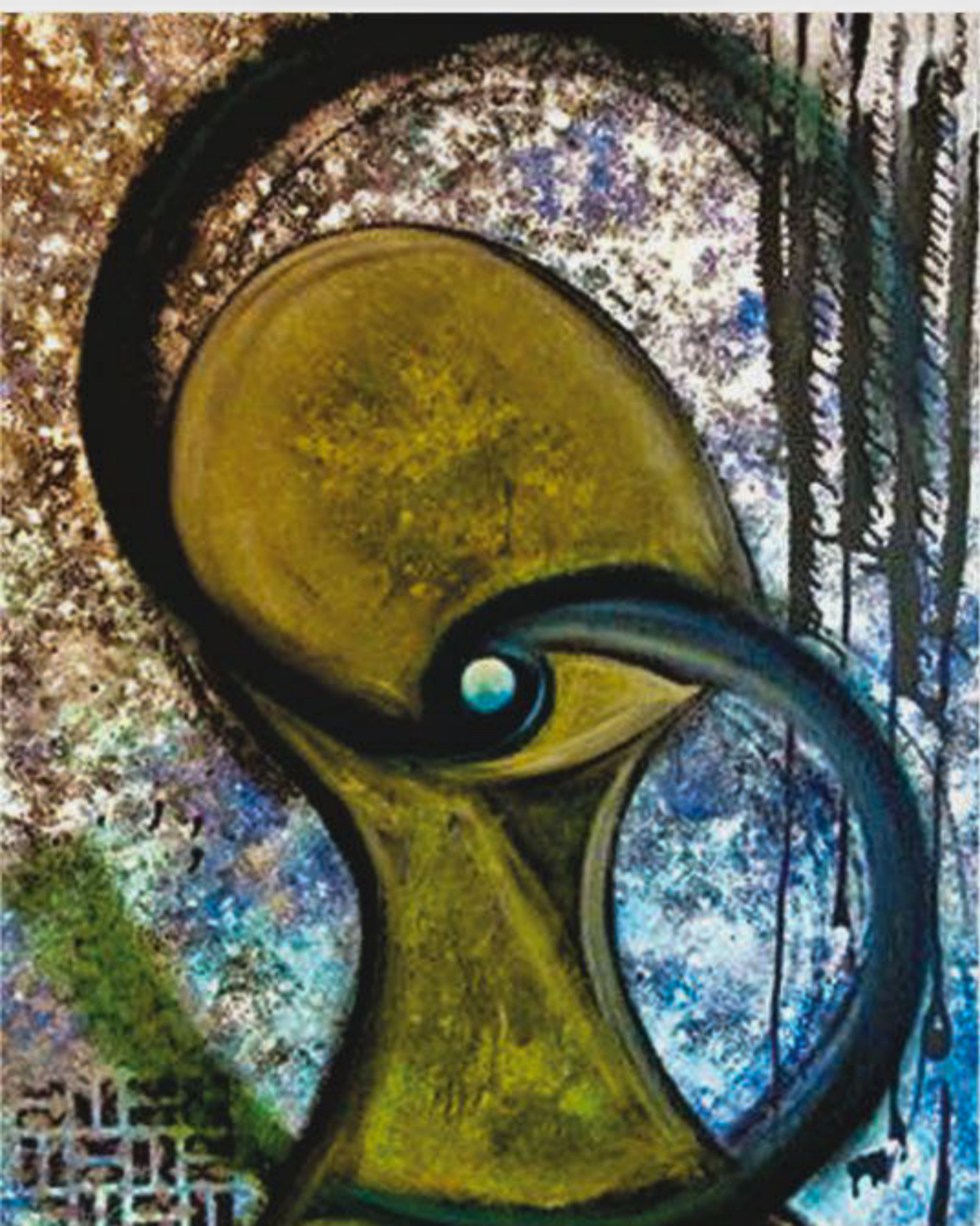
Can there be a virtual poetry revival?

KAISER HAQ

A few months back I published an article in these pages with the interrogative title, "Is Poetry a Dying Art?" After a somewhat dispiriting account of the state of poetry today, I concluded with the observation that the internet might improve the fortunes of this quintessential literary form; and added that it would take another article to explain why I thought so. Our astute literary editor seized the opportunity to demand that I deliver the explanation. Hence this piece, with another interrogative title. I will go point by point, beginning with –

THE OBVIOUS.

The amount of poetry on the net is simply staggering. All the great and popular poems we have – or ought to



have – read are a mouse click away. You can plug the holes in your reading with a daily dose of poetry; refresh your memory, or help others refresh theirs,

as I discovered some years back. An old friend, the late lamented journalist Tareq Ahsan aka Shomi, phoned me one day and, quoting a line from a once-popular poem, asked if I knew who had written it. He had read it ages back and the line had stuck in his memory, but the author's name escaped him. I was on the same boat as he, but my computer was on, and in a second Google provided the answer, which I passed on with a preliminary "Um, let me think." After a few more incidents like this I began receiving fulsome praise for my capacious memory. I chuckled to myself but didn't let on. I like to imagine Tareq chuckling as he reads this on the celestial version of the internet. It is not only the poetry of the past, poems out of copyright that are available on the internet. You can access numerous literary journals specializing in poetry, as well as their archives. Some of these are online journals; others have both print and online versions. You can also submit your own work for consideration via email.

HOW TO DEVELOP YOUR TASTE FOR POETRY WITH THE HELP OF THE INTERNET.

As you are aware, poetry needs to be savoured, pondered, read aloud. A little poem can take you a long way as you discover its semantic and aural subtleties. The best way to read poetry, in my view, is poem by poem. You cannot, in other words, plunge into a fat collection of poems and go through it like a novel, cover to cover, and at a

trot. I recommend that you take a poem that interests you – maybe one that made a lasting impression when you first came across it – and google it. Print out a copy and carry it in your pocket or purse; and read it, slowly, whenever you have a minute to spare. Read it aloud when you are by yourself – or if you can overcome your self-consciousness, read it out to a friend. Lovers and Lotharios, by the way, have long been aware of the romantic and seductive uses of verse read out well.

The internet can be a big help in enhancing our appreciation of the sound of poetry. There are numerous recordings, audio as well as audio-visual, of poetry readings. Some are by actors, including celebrated ones like Sir Richard Burton, some by amateur poetry enthusiasts, some by poets. I find poets reading their own works the most interesting. You can listen to the sole recording of Walt Whitman reading for half a minute or so from a poem titled 'America'. The way he articulates each word is suggestive of the poetic value it embodies. You can then leap to his twentieth century poetic descendant Allen Ginsberg reciting a well-known poem, also titled 'America'. The received opinion of Ginsberg, especially among those brought up on New Criticism and Formalism, is that he is a rantier. That isn't quite fair. Listening to him reading 'America' brought home to me his subtle-jokey-comic-ironic dimensions. Once you get used to experiencing poetry via the internet, you may wish to make up anthologies of your favourite poets and poems by printing them out

and having them bound. Many contemporary poets whose books are hard to come by have hundreds of poems that you can access on the net. Let me give one example. Billy Collins is one of the finest poets writing in America today, but if you order any of his ten or so collections from a bookstore here, is there any guarantee you will get it within a reasonable time? And which one would you order? I trawled the net and found a broad selection that I turned into a personal anthology; whenever I wish I take it to bed, where I do most of my reading and thinking and writing.

HOW THE INTERNET HAS AFFECTED MY CAREER.

My observations on the positive role of the internet in promoting poetry followed the most gratifying discovery that, unbeknownst to me, some of my work was travelling in cyberspace. I don't simply mean that my work has appeared in online publications, for such appearances are the results of conscious intention. Thus the websites of the Daily Star, the Dhaka Tribune, the online versions of The Asiatic (Malaysia), the Journal of Transnational Literatures (Flinders University), and online journals like the Drunken Boat, Brooklyn Voice, India Writes, have some of my poems because I submitted them for publication. The poems might have sat on these sites waiting for the odd browser to take a look and move on. But something else also happened. People I do not know picked up poems and gave them a second cyber-home.

Google 'Living in a Lungi' and you will find a site run by the University of Northern Iowa. It outlines an afternoon programme for high schools, as part of their Human Geography course, in which students cut cloth, stitch lungis, wear them, and recite my poem 'Ode on the Lungi'. The site tells us that the text of the poem was taken from the Daily Star. Go into Youtube and type in 'How Many Buddhas Can They Destroy', another poem of mine that first appeared in the Daily Star. There are two identical sites, Vietnamese as far as I can tell, on which you can read my poem as it unfolds to the accompaniment of gentle music. Someone put up three of my poems on Poem Hunter. One of them has a video attachment with a recording in an electronic voice: listening to it is a strange but not uninteresting experience. Ron Silliman, a well-known American poet, has a blog on which he puts up poetry-related material he has picked up from divers sources: you will find pieces relating to me taken from the Daily Star.

Have I provided convincing evidence of the positive role the internet can play in disseminating poetry? Even if you answer in the affirmative, the question remains: will the internet bring about a poetry revival? Perhaps not. But it can certainly make it easier for poetry to travel, and for poetry lovers to discover interesting new voices.

Kaiser Haq is a Bangladeshi poet, translator, essayist, critic and academic.

Reporting on
Dissent

QP ALAM

Amidst the endless contest for power, every nation-state is beset with insurgencies. A casualty in these conflicts is often the freedom of thought and expression. This year's Bengal Lights Literary Conclave, organized by the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), explored these issues and their effect on the written word under the theme "Dissent, Reportage and Literature".

The annual conclave was created to generate debate on important topics. What sets this unique event apart from other literary festivals and conferences is that it attempts to occupy a discussion space somewhere between these two. It brings together a highly selective group of international experts in intensive discussions, which are then made available online.

The panelists this year included writers in exile and those living under oppressive regimes, as well as war correspondents who have reported from the frontlines. They hailed from eight countries in four continents and were joined by thought-leaders and policy makers from Bangladesh.

The keynote speaker this year was the American writer and journalist William T. Vollmann, author of the award-winning book Europe Central. In his speech, Vollmann detailed his long-running harassment by the US authorities. At the end he concluded, "I still love my country, but I see how government-haters are made."

In the panel, "Reporting Against Reason", Dutch writer and journalist Femke van Zeijl and Pakistani journalist and author of Karachi, "You're Killing Me!" Saba Imtiaz, along with editor of the Dhaka Tribune Zafar Sobhan, discussed reporting on violent movements that seem to be without reason.

Other panels centered on the topic of "Endless Insurgency". Looking at why insurgencies persist in the world, William Vollmann, German writer and publisher Meike Ziervogel, and Indian journalist and writer Sudeep Chakravarti spoke with Bangladeshi writer K. Anis Ahmed. Another panel explored the same issue in the context of Bangladesh. Moderated by Sudeep Chakravarti, this panel included the local scholars and practitioners Kazi Nabil Ahmed, Salimullah Khan and Syed Manzoorul Islam.

Noted Indian author and editor Githa Hariharan led a discussion of how the threatened state of freedom of expression affects writers and their art in the panel "Writing: Under Siege" with Sudeep Chakravarti and Equatorial Guinean writer-in-exile Juan Tomás Ávil Laurel.

Nigerian novelist A Igoni Barrett, Bangladeshi writer Khademul Islam, Meike Ziervogel and William Vollmann, discussed the many forms of "Fictions of Empire" with London-based Bangladeshi poet Ahsan Akbar.

Lastly, American editor and publisher C. P. Heiser moderated a panel on the ways in which fiction remains bound up in reportage, with Femke van Zeijl, Githa Hariharan and Meike Ziervogel.

In between the panels, American poet and translator David Shook, Juan Tomás Ávil Laurel, Bangladeshi poet and activist Sadaf Saaz, as well as Ahsan Akbar, recited from their works.

Books written by all conclave panelists were available for purchase at the venue courtesy of Bookworm. Videos, photos and transcripts from all the sessions will be made available online at conclave.bengallights.com.

OUTLANDISH
RUBAIYAT SIDDIQUE

I miss my unborn child
Fetuses...that never saw the dawn of life
Insatiable desire of motherhood haunt my disheveled senses
Throes of despair conquer my frenetic spirit.
Unfertilized, my eggs get wasted in the monthly cycle of nature.

I try and draw a mental image of my unborn child
The child my womb never embraced,
Distorted visions flash through my subconscious
Yearnings to hear an infant's first cry overwhelm me.
I envision the final moments before labour, how would I have reacted?
Honks from a passing car jolt me back to my uninhibited melancholy.
I sieve through voids, fetch through the paranormal,
My soul deluged in the longing to cocoon life and nurture it within.

BLOOD BANK
MOHIT-UL-ALAM

Translated by Shamsul Faiz

This is the blood -
Rub it with your fingers and look.
What do you see?
Is it of Shen or Ali?
Do you not understand?
Is it of Richard or Barua?
Blood is such.
It doesn't give any scope to understand
It is a killer of borderlines,
It denies any clan-identity.
It doesn't come from outside;
It enters inside.
What is it to the sword of a white cap?
To the scimitar, it is just the same.
Accepted by all and everyone.
Blood is an ancient traveler.
It has come to the world from long before
It never learnt to wear long dhoti,
Nor white punjabi.
It didn't smarten up in a tie and coat.
Nor stood bald, wearing an ochre dress.
You don't make a farce
Of this aged great grandfather
Setting borderlines, in countries and villages.

Once you were very near to death.
How many bags did you take then?
Did you see then? Whose was that blood?
Was it of Shen or Ali, Richard or Barua?

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DORIE LARUE

She believed she was about thirty
years old when she ran, bolted the door
behind her so her mother could not follow,
leaving her daughter crying.
Her only companion a certainty that something
had to be done. She'd heard rumours
of Dhaka, how women clawed their way
up, were paid an ungodly wage,
10000 taka, 90 American dollars,
and she had Riva, the math whiz,
beginning to dream of school,
where poems floated above heads,
whispered, unwritten. Unable to be.

And then she was waking in
a shed the size of a shipping crate,
her days and half nights sewing invisible
seams into jeans, women's bright shirts.
Twelve hours a day and one year later,
she sent for her.
Riva's school uniform, books
paid for and waiting.
Next came the delicate thread
of smoke, released from some
preternatural bobbin, and the stairwell
(filled with stored, finished clothing)
transformed itself into a flue,
spinning out flames, unstraightening the walls.
Her only chance to see Riva again
was to pull her legs out
from the avalanche of bodies near
the locked door to prevent pilfering
and leap out of an industrialist's contract,
four stories into a union of air
where others, already launched,
trailed their burning skirts, the ends of burning
hair,
arms fluttering like flaming wings.
The cobbles catch and shatter
thoroughly her legs, and around her,
(except one, hung almost neatly over a cable),
careless piles of flung laundry,
with arms and hands, refuse to stir.

On another planet someone
fingers the shirt she'd hunched over
last month, a size 34, inspects the seams,
notes the cost, swipes a card,
heads toward Starbucks.
Her schooling ensued
from constitutional right,
some dusty amendment.
She has never read a book
until its spine broke.