

From Dhaka and Dirty Dialectics:

A Prose Poem in Seven Microcantos

for Akhtaruzzaman Elias and Carol Villanueva

BY AZFAR HUSSAIN

So where is history written/except in the poems?

—Audre Lorde, *Our Dead behind Us*

They have told me I only talk about politics now.

—Ernesto Cardenal, *Zero Hour*

Microcanto IV

But, Dhaka, I hear your sepoy in the attic say, as he fashions his life after the size and shape of a solitude more tenacious than my father's faith, and I hear your schoolteacher's wife say, as she cooks a modest meal with greens and fish—maybe with a tang of lemon—for her husband, and I hear your young lovers say, as their bodies blast in a single burst of honey, and I hear your sentimental poet say, as he seeks to bandage the eyes of a crazy bull with a piece of red cloth, and I hear your painter say, as she draws an orange composed of peels of flame, and I hear your single mothers say, as they pick out lice from each other's hair, and I hear your professional cook say, as his knife goes gentle into the pulp of a lonely tomato, and I hear your driver say, as his ambulance wails like a wounded animal, and I hear your *muezzin* say, as he clears his throat before calling his community to prayers in the *muhalla's* mosque, and I hear your fortuneteller say, as he reads a fate-line curved like Zindabahr's second lane, and I hear your cobbler say, as he mobilizes his tools to set those out-of-joint shoes right, and I hear your studentleader say, as he argues a national case with ideas and guns, and I hear your apolitical intellectual say, as he contemplates the notion of nothingness, and I hear your lower-division clerk say, as he dreams of winning the lottery and making big bucks, and I hear your bureaucrat say, as he renders his files and papers infinitely hospitable to dust honored by time, and I hear your businessman say, as he sinks his big ass slowly into the cushion of his sleek



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limousine and bites deep into the round innocence of an apple, and I hear your announcer say, as the national radio punctuates a Lalon song with a soap ad: *your class-lines are stronger than your blood-lines*.

Does my hysterical and diabolical materialism bother your Board of Spiritual Advisors in the middle of their meeting or meditation?

Microcanto VII

Dhaka: On another register.

It's cool and funky for these American boys to read Mao's

red books and sport Che's face on their T-shirts and even tattoo *Malcom* [sic] on their white skin. And they think revolution as a violent phenomenon begins with yoking together Marley and marijuana. And they discuss the current state of the proletarian movement over popcorn, Pepsi, and pizza. And they debate for hours the fine points of dialectics at Starbucks, while listening to jazz or blues, John Coltrane or Dizzy Gillespie. And they write haiku in the lower case to declare that they are new-millennium combatants in solidarity with their third-world brothers

and sisters. And high on their coffeshop praxis and monolingual internationalism, those revolutionaries-in-residence say, "Your English is excellent, Mr. Hussain!" I say, "So is yours and so fucking what?" And I continue: Is there any mention of Dhaka in your *Che Made Easy* or your *Malcolm in Fifty Minutes*? Do you know where Dhaka is? And their long answer is a silence standing like a nervous middleman between them and us.

Dhaka: You bore me sometimes, and sometimes you even get on my nerves, but—believe me—I've this crazy, crazy obsession with you. Probably I, too, can declare nothing but my love for you and churn out all those clichés or corny jokes about your hangups, your manners, and your shifting mood—indicative or imperative or subjunctive or dark or sunny or silly or frisky or whatever. Probably I, too, can psychoanalyze your six emotions, as the Chinese counted them: sorrow, joy, hate, love, pleasure, anger. Probably I, too, can write the saddest or happiest lines, whether on a hard-ass summerday smelling like burnt rubber or a rainy night offering love and its lyrical madness. Probably I, too, can get confessional and even a bit controversial, announcing that I romanticize you, idealize you, make a fetish of you, and even loan you out like *Bollywood Hits*, as many of your sons and daughters do under this different sky.

And even when I leave you and resort to this exile, a pseudo-exile, I return to you at every turn, while you keep returning to me both clean and dirty, making me guilty, morose, dissatisfied, happy, hopeful. Hopeful about change. For I see another world taking shape in your children's eyes: hear, hear the rage roaring in the silence of Kalim-the-kamla and Sakhiman-the-sweeper.

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Dhaka Landing

FAYEZA HASANAT

Chapter One: Accelerando

Dhaka was still slumbering. The sun was yet to come up, and the silence spread over the pitched road was yet to be swallowed by the honking of cars, the bells of rickshaws, the screeching of street vendors, the cawing of crows and the barking of stray dogs. Rimla opened all the windows of their 10th floor apartment to invite the morning, but dusty darkness entered instead, bringing with it the first swarm of fresh mosquitoes. Rimla darted out in search of the Aerosol spray. She could not afford to have mosquitoes in her house today—no dengue, chikungunya, or malaria carrier should fly near her house—not for a week! She covered her nose with the anchal of her sari and put her index finger on top of the can and sprayed rhythmically at the direction of every buzz, moving her hand back and forth, right and left, up, and sometimes down. Sajed always called this her mosquito dance.

Sajed covered his eyes and ears with a pillow, hoping to block the dusty morning sun and mute a screaming wife. But Rimla was not willing to indulge her husband. She freed his head from the pillow sandwich and brought her mouth closer to his ears, so that no words of hers went unheard.

"My brother is coming home after twenty years, and you are still in bed!"

Rupam had managed to sleep peacefully amidst the buzzing of the alarm clock and the mosquitoes and a nagging mother, until she started banging at his door.

"You've to leave the house by seven! The plane lands at nine, remember?"

"Come on, Mum! It's not like your brother will get lost there!"

But what if he did? What if some thugs snatched his American passport, or stole his luggage from the conveyor belt? Shouldn't Rupam be already up and on his way? Didn't he know how far Uttara could be from Gulshan, if he failed to claim the road before the rest of the city did? Why was Sajed still in bed? Shouldn't he already have picked up that order of *rumali roti* and beef kebab platter from Star Kabab House? How could she run when her family lay in bed like dead soldiers? How could they rule over the hustle and bustle of Dhaka city if they failed to divide and share the chaos!

And where was Rupam's friend Lalon? Hadn't he agreed to be the chauffeur-cum-guide for the whole week? The sky was falling over her head, but did anyone care?

Lalon had been waiting inside the airport for two hours. He could see Rupam through the glass door, waiting outside with the rest of the eager crowd. But how would he know which one of these arriving passengers was his friend's uncle?

"Look, look! On your right, by the conveyor belt! The gentleman in a grey blazer. Yes, that's him!" Rupam screamed over the phone.

"Are you sure?" Lalon sounded unconvinced.

"Don't you think I'd recognize my own uncle?"

"You said he hadn't been home for twenty years!"

"We visited him last year, dude."

"Why?"

"Why's he coming?"

"No, why didn't he?"

"Cause life punched him on the face; the big apple fell on him and crushed his spine. Can you stop asking questions and bring him out!"

The older gentleman came out first, followed by a miserable shadow, who was maneuvering a four-wheeled luggage cart with its two wheels broken, and a third one, missing. Swerving through the veering crowd, Rupam ran to greet his uncle.

"How was your journey, *Boromama*?" Rupam grinned.

"Journey! You mean the trauma of watching the whole of Dhaka landing suddenly on my head? God knows how the plane managed to squeeze itself into a thin paper and pass through those tunnels of high-rise mockeries of cardboard buildings! Is it a test for the planes, or for the buildings surrounding the airport—to

see who can outlive the other? What Darwinian urban planning?"

"We need to run before the traffic catches up with us." Lalon reminded.

"How much for your service? Never mind, keep the change."

"Oh, no, *Boromama*, I'm not your porter." Lalon grinned as the gentleman handed him a hundred dollar bill. "I'm a bonus nephew that you've earned for a week, as a part of your Dhaka tour package."

"Yes, *Boromama*. Lalon, my buddy here, has graciously agreed to be your 'service nephew' for the next seven days."

"How about his work?"

"He hates to work for a living, and unlike us, he doesn't need to."

"A privileged Lalon! What an odd combination!"

"I'm only one fourth of the oddities in my family! My two older brothers are named Bayezid and Bostami, and my younger sister is named Geeti. Together, we are Bayezid Bostami, and Lalon Geeti. Go figure!"

"Are they all like you—committed to doing nothing for a living?"

"Quite the opposite; my brothers have submitted to corporate slavery and my sister has earned herself a town tycoon. I'm the only bohemian in the family—a metropolitan Lalon with no purpose!"

"Watch out for the speed bump, Lalon..." Rupam cried out.

"Slowly! Slow down, Lalon! Why's everyone honking at you? What did you do...brake...brake...people...more people...a procession... wait...why's the child wiping your window...another one on my side...what's he selling...Where's his mother? WAIT, slow down, stop! You'll run him over...waitwaitwaitstoptopred...RED LIGHT! Did you just run a red light?"

Rimla's face turned yellowish than turmeric. Her brother refused to eat the food Sajed had brought from the most famous Kabab House in Dhaka! He declared her kitchen unhygienic and her maid unfit. He demanded to know if their water filter was approved by Dhaka's FDA.

"But we have no such approval system!" Rimla was utterly frustrated. "Ours is the best filter you can get in this country!"

"Then filter the water twice! Wash everything with filtered water. I don't want to go back home with hookworms and *Helicobacter pylori*."

Chapter Two: Crescendo

Why was this place called 'Hatir Jheel'? It didn't resemble an elephant at all, in its shape, built, or color, unless of course, you took the slow and heavy traffic into consideration. Was that why it was named so? To allude to the endless surges of elephantiasis afflicted traffic?

When did Savar move so far? In America, he could have made two road trips back and forth from New York to Connecticut by this time, and Savar would still stay beyond the moon!

Shahid Minar was bigger the last time he saw it, and the mother figure didn't use to stoop that low.

There was this store called *Smriti Optics*, in the New Market area, where he used to hang out with his friends. But those—both the market and the store—seemed to have vanished in the maddening crowd. Where did the old—new market go?

Was that a river oozing by the Sadar Ghat? For a moment it looked like a blocked sewerage.

Who were those people, strolling down the walkways of Ramna Park? Back in the days, only prostitutes and their clients used to loiter around, especially at this hour!

What was that spectral structure behind *Aparajeyo Bangla*—trembling, as if on the verge of a collapse? Was it the Arts Building? No kidding!

Lalon drove the grumpy old man around the university campus until his stomach started growling.

"Let's have lunch at..." he proposed.

"No way in hell I'm eating at a street hotel!"

"Then stay in the car."

Lalon parked by a hotel on Nazimuddin Road and started walking. *Boromama* followed him like a hungry man's miserable shadow.

"We ate here forty-seven years ago," *Boromama* put down his fork and dipped his fingers in the creamy puddle of a lobster curry.

"Who's 'we'?"

"I always ordered lobster, and she'd ask for some fried Hilsa."

"Who's 'she'?"

"The last time we came here, she sat quietly and ate nothing. After lunch, I dropped her off, promising to come back for her in two years. And then I flew away."

"The last time we came here, she sat quietly and ate nothing. After lunch, I dropped her off, promising to come back for her in two years. And then I flew away."

"You never came back for her?"

"I couldn't; the war reached her before I did, and... took her."

"But after the war?"

"War is a vicious testing ground, my dear; it turns some people into heroes, and some, cowards. She belonged to the first group."

Boromama was not complaining against the city anymore. He seemed to have run out of words.

"Did you ever wonder what happened to the woman ditched by her lover because she was braver than him?" Lalon broke the silence.

"I still do," *Boromama* murmured.

"Do you remember her address?"

"Crystal clear."

"Doesn't cowardice suck, *Boromama*?"

"It surely does, and you're right. I shouldn't go back without going back first!" *Boromama* suddenly changed his gear from sad to thrilled and turned himself

Into an updated GPS system, giving Lalon precise direction to 1250 Tezturi Bazaar, telling him which roads to avoid and which streets to cut through.

"How do you still remember all these?"

"You thought I was born with a fat wallet in my pocket? There were days when I walked eight hours a day, selling chalks and dusters to every school you can name—from Armanitola to Jhikatala to Mahuttuli to Tikatuli to Kamalapur to Azimpur to Lalbagh to Peyarabagh to Fakirapur to Hatirpur—from one end of the town to the other. My dear Lalon Shai, I know Dhaka like the palm of my hand."

Chapter Three: Coda

She wore a green sari with red border. Her graying hair was loosely tucked in a bun, and a gold chain with a cross pendant hugged her slender neck. Her eyes had the brightness of a child's smile.

This is Nirupoma D'Costa. *Boromama* said softly. The woman looked at Lalon smilingly for a moment, and then kept her eyes fixed on the old gentleman who stood awkwardly, holding her right hand.

"How are you, Niru?" He asked in a strange voice.

"You still don't take care of yourself, do you?"

"You haven't aged a bit."

"You have lost your eyesight, I must say."

"You're still a loner?"

"Do sit down and let me get some tea. Do you still take it black, with two spoons of sugar? And how about you, Lalon?"

She went to the kitchen to prepare the tea.

As they headed home, Lalon kept his focus on the road, trying not to pay attention to a seventy-year-old man who sat by him and sobbed like a little child lost in the labyrinth of life.

The Customs Officer at the JFK airport welcomed him back with a cordial smile.

"Went to visit Bangladesh? Which city?" He asked the wearied traveler.

"Dhaka. The most beautiful city in the world."

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Two Idiots in Dhaka

NIRMALENDU GOON

Translated by Fakrul Alam

That building over there—that is the High Court!

--"Wow-looks so amazingly round—so beautiful!"
"But what was the cost involved in building it?"

"Who knows? Such a major feat of architecture!
Is there any limit to spending on such occasions?"

"Tell me—wasn't there a tiny zoo there
Once upon a time—do you remember it?"

"The things you say—how could I forget?
I've been living in Dhaka for thirty years now!"

"So where has the zoo been shifted to?"

"It's been a while since it moved to Mirpur."

"The other side of town? What a bright idea?
Couldn't have these two things in the same site."

"And that is our famous parliament building!"

"Wow! Isn't that quite fantastic looking?"

"And why won't it be? Mr. Louis Kahn designed it,
He is the internationally renowned French-American architect."

"Louis Kahn? That man has a visionary!
Lest anyone had any reservations
He built eyes of all sizes on it."

"And you'll be delighted to know
There is no zoo anywhere near it"

"Really?"

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