



FICTION

The Fish of Kalsni

ANDREW EAGLE

"The whole area will be digital!" says Taimur. He has the crazy, bald, and beard-proprietor of Taimur's betel leaf stand on the footpath outside Md Giasuddin's tin shed tea stall. "When the Metro comes our Kalsni will be a new New York!"

With hand gesture he presents the street to his two friends—three random Bengalis in a largely Bihari neighborhood—as though it were a TV game show prize: a bedbug-infested, potholed Mirpur laneway with hobby-builder housing blocks in decaying rainbow colors on the tea stall side, along with a dying factory, and a broad rubbish and sludge-filled drain on the other. Taimur is from Gopalganj; enthusiasm for the ruling party is his birthright.

"The Metro is hardly for people like us," says a voice from below and further south. Alam, the beggar of Bholan heritage, has been sitting cross-legged with his plate at Taimur's feet every day for twelve years. He's a lanky fellow who early in his career appreciated that people were more sympathetic when he didn't tower over them. Indeed, Alam, whose knees ache from all the sitting, often falls at how height-prejudiced charity can be.

"Of course it's for you!" squeals Taimur. "All the Sabhis and Begums from the housing society who cruise this alley in their shiny cars, what will they do, eh? They'll walk to the Metro and as they go, they'll drop a few notes in your grubby little dish!"

The thought of more notes in his dish leaves Alam quiet. Thus the moment is ripe for Giasuddin to pipe in the plump, mismatched shopkeeper often waxes until last to add his bit of Manjira-breed street savvy. "The banes of praise are up, road holes down. The job's done! The Miro'll never actually build the Metro," he predicts.

Taimur couldn't have let such an anti-Gopalganj slur stand except that just then Jony, a rummy lad of twelve, rushes up. He's ill-at-ease. "Have you seen Taimur, my dog?" he asks urgently. Jony is shaping his hands as if to mime the perimeter of a sports bag. Giasuddin realizes it's one of his digital, fluffy breeds he's lost, a canine of the type that live entire lives on balconies.

"She was seen running down this lane about ten minutes ago," Jony continues, flustered.

"Sorry, No," says Taimur. "I saw no Taimur," says Giasuddin. "I didn't see a thing," adds Alam, pushing his friends to laughter since Alam is blind.

Jony is about to carry on down the bustling laneway when Alam continues. "But I did hear something."

"Really?" Jony asks.

"You won't like it," Alam warns,

not only to Jony. "I heard a loud splash, then a thrashing about sound coming from the drain."

"Idiot!" retorts Giasuddin. "Don't start! That was years ago!"

"Taimur can swim," Jony interjects. "She swam in the waves at Cox's Bazar."

"If it was only swimming," mutters Alam.

"Don't listen to him!" Giasuddin barks. "His mother was a horse. He doesn't know rice from straw! Search for your dog, son. She'll turn up."

Jony follows Giasuddin's advice, leaving three friends quietly contemplating. "It's well-known that a murgur fish can walk overland," Taimur eventually starts. "Maybe it came back?"

"Remember how it crossed the entire laneway to swallow that caged pigeon in front of Mahbub Bhai's fruit stand?" says Alam.

"That never happened!"

"I don't know if that was true or not, but I've seen a murgur fish walk overland in front of Mahbub Bhai's fruit stand," says Alam.

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city run-off that can make a fish grow large, so speculation about sound coming from the drain."

"Murgur fish eat anything," says Alam. "Back in Bholia there was a big criminal in our area who kept a pond brimming with murgurs. He used to throw the bodies of anyone he killed in there and the man—"

"Would be reduced to bones, flesh sucked away in seconds, a whole body slurped up."

Of course not everybody believed in the Kalsni fish at first but certain evidence was difficult to refute. For one thing, several witnesses independently referred to a v-shaped scar above its right gill. For another, that drain was the only one the slum-dwellers wouldn't fish during the monsoon floods: it was known they'd catch nothing there. It was as if every living thing, every vaguely edible morsel had been picked clean from that drain stretch.

And then there were the sewer-cleaners, that class of practitioner who routinely dives into manholes without any equipment, holding their breaths and plunging to toxic depths to clear blockages: to this day they refuse to undog that particular drain, albeit of the casier, open-air variety. It's an aversion born of the sudden disappearance of one of their number assigned there. A more usual explanation is that the fellow was engaged in an illicit affair with a garment worker in Savar and eloped with her. But inevitably, others blame the fish.

Over time, the fish became accepted fact. Even the professor from Mirpur's esteemed Modern and Beautiful Northeast International College who resided on the third-floor of one of the better buildings could not deny the fish, in the end.

Those were stressful months. The poultry feriwalaks kept their caged chickens even on their beds of a night for security. Mothers of small children, a younger Jony among them, strictly forbade their charges to walk along the laneway without explaining why. Even Giasuddin altered his habit of leaving shingaras in the glass counter of his shop overnight in case the fish showed up. And then, shortly after the sewer-cleaner vanished so too did all signs of the fish. At the time, Taimur proved that the sewer-cleaner had gotten too much and it died of indigestion. Or perhaps he struggled and mortally

wounded the creature, suggested Alam. Or said others, it might've mugged off somewhere on its fins, as murgur fish do. Whatever the truth, the neighbourhood settled down.

Despite what Giasuddin said to comfort Jony, neither he nor Taimur doubted Alam's ability to hear. Over the alleyway's hubbub he'd once stopped a woman to warn her that her broach had just fallen onto the roadside. Sure enough, she gratefully found it. Could the fish be back, after all?

There was no sign of Taimur. Jony came looking on the following day, and the day after that. He always stopped to ask the trio and on the third day, Jony's teary eyes moved Giasuddin to speak up. "We need to tell him about the fish," Giasuddin says.

When the elaborate thirty-five minute narration is done, Alam has an idea. "You could try to catch it," he says to Jony. "If you split its belly open there may be some remnant of Tina Turner. At least you'd be sure."

The next day the friends observe as hour after hour into the afternoon, Jony squats beside the drain with a usual kind of fishing pole. Lastly they call to him.

"You'll need a much bigger pole," says Alam. "Why not borrow a bamboo scaffolding pole from the building site on the corner?"

"For bait at least half a chicken will do," adds Taimur, "and tie it on with wire since rope will never hold the beast."

"Here, take this for the hook," says ever-practical Giasuddin, reaching for one of the industrial-thick s-shaped metal rods used to hang packets of crisps at his tea stall.

The following morning Jony is at it again, with about the weirdest fishing rig Mirpur has ever seen. One hour passes, then another. "It was here, maybe I walked off again," says Taimur.

And then, at around 11.30 a.m., there's the jolt of a terrified scream followed by a tremendous splash. Taimur and Giasuddin jump to their feet and race over the road, Alam scrambling close behind. "Hai! Hai!" sings an incredulous, trembling Taimur as they reach the drain's edge. There's no sign of the lad.

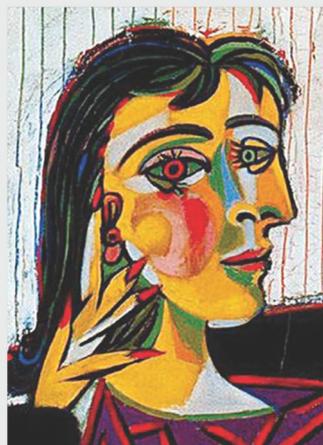
"I'm not a strong swimmer," Giasuddin announces. "I'm feeling giddy," says Taimur. "I really can't see," adds Alam. Seized by a paralyzing fear of fishy lips and slippery whiskers, there'll be no heroics. None will dive in after the boy. Would you?

A bamboo scaffolding pole floats ominously on the film of sludge-water. A few toxic bubbles play up nearby, and just then, a dirty dog of the fluffy digital variety saunters up the middle of the laneway, trotting along without a care.

Andrew Eagle is an English Instructor and feature writer of The Daily Star.



POETRY



The Eternal Song

BATOOL SARWAR

I celebrate myself—
I draw into myself all humanity
And sing in solidarity with my sisters
A song spread across the horizons
Seamlessly interweaving the glittering shards
Of sinuous shifting images—
It is as if a magic lantern threw the nerves
In patterns across a screen.

Bold intellectual women gaze across the sundering seas
To receive the wisdom of the sages
The magic mantra of mystic mages
Beckoning to liberation from constricting chains
Leading them to the Promised Land, free of pain—
"Ring out old things, Ring in the new
Discard all inhibitions, and dance in the dew"
But patriarchal power still circulates
Like old wine in new bottles—
The mythical land recedes with each advance
Like a mirage in the desert
And danders wanderer lost
In the intoxicant induced world of illusion

Borrowed metaphors dictate the need for whiteness
To the fair and lovely damsel
Waiting for her knight in shining armor,
While the dancing body of the more daring beauty
Confidently adorns billboards and progress:
And magazines venerate the glittering goddess
Worshipped at the altar of freedom and progress:
"Attractive eye candy" says the wolf whistling chauvinist
Cazing at sashaying forms on revolving ramps;
"Brainless featherheads" sneers the disgusted feminist
Staring in disgust at the glittering figures
Arrayed to display the eternal weavings
Of the world of fashion and beauty
"Seductive and sexy" says the envious housewife
Stuck in the world of dishes and dishes;

But night brings its own reality
To tired faces in empty hotel rooms
When the make-up mask is bared
And whispered stories are shared
By women uncertain and scared
Of market rates and marriage rites
Botox fillers and bitter fights—
See-saw desires, despair-laden discourses
Of dazzling denizens of a deceptive domain
Sung, celebrated, used, abused
And confuted.

But who are those shadowy figures seen in the distance?
The draped invisible veiled women;
Convention dictates that they be
Constantly derided, discussed and dismissed
As repressed, humiliated and oppressed
Static and silent, backward and depressed
Always represented and never self-expressed—
Where is their voice in poem, and song?
Are all tunes the same? Do all words tell the same story?
Whose gaze privileges? Whose speaks the language of power?
Whose discourse is dominant? Who decides to bestow
The defining epithets on female forms—
"Smoldering" and "Fiery"
"Dull" and "Dreary"
A foreign tongue it is that speaks
A manacled metaphor it is that seeks
To forever fit square pegs in round holes.

My voice is that breaks
That endless silence with an eternal song
I need no borrowed feathers to dress me
Or an alien language to express me
I resist reductive generalizations
Poetry pours from the pores of my being
Mesmerized by the mystic melodious music
Ising of ageless sexless souls
Flood engulfed in God's gaze
Self-sundered in the song of God's beauty.

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shoots Giasuddin. "It was only talk. Okay, so there might've been a large fish in the drain back then, but fish don't eat pigeons. Besides, how could a fish take a pigeon from its cage?"

It was a reasonable point. On the other hand, the walking catfish of Kalsni, if it did exist, was no ordinary fish. Few could claim to have seen it beyond a flash of scales, but those who had caught a glimpse often trembled to recount it. The most gigantic, ferocious, ugly-looking fish they'd ever seen was the common thread: bulbous, football-sized eyes; whiskers like hideous octopus tentacles; a wart-covered mouth that stretched half the drain span. It was the size of a goat, some reported. It spat fat-sized balls of putrid sludge at passersby, insisted others.

Not even the largest pond in the farthest village had ever known a fish like the one that'd terrorized that laneway for several months, it would seem. Perhaps there is some nutrient in dying factory effluent or

SNIPPETS



A SUITABLE BOY

Him: Off to India. What should I bring you?
Her: An Unsuitable Boy of course!



I WROTE THIS FOR MYSELF

At 16, she was bullied for walking like a "robot".
At 26, she is lauded for the way she glides.
A caterpillar is always destined to be a butterfly.

TS MARIN

FOR YOU

And then, the setting sun changes every moment. Coral to red to purple to dusky pink. A kaleidoscopic vision, a red rainbow, a plethora of scarlets.



NARCISSA

"But we just met. You don't know the first thing about me!" She said.
He smiled wryly. "Let me see. You have slightly mismatched brows this week. 11 freckles on your nose, a beauty spot in the corner of your lips, the more prominent one being on your chin. Can be seen only when you look at the sky though!
Oooh— another one at the base of your left ear, though hidden in hair. All your pink lipsticks seem the same, but there must be at least 6 different shades deployed! You bite your lips when nervous or at a loss of words like right now. These are merely among the few things I know about your face, and you say I don't know you at all!"

PHOTO: ORONNO AHASAN