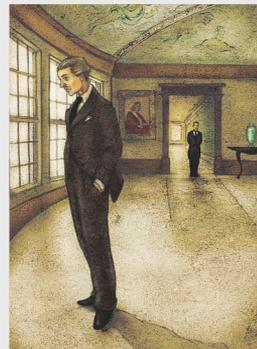


## MUSINGS

## POETRY



# Butler

BINOY BARMAN

(For Kazuo Ishiguro, 2017 Nobel Literature Laureate)

The language of self-deception—  
Is that we are born for?  
Leaves cannot whisper the truth  
Especially is muffled by promises unfulfilled  
Don't talk to me of dignity  
It's only a myth  
Or merely a mark of loyalty.

Forget and remember at your convenience  
Ignore the urge of the self  
Remember your duties  
And forget all agonies  
Memory is ambiguous  
The morning smile or evening's glow  
Are all leavened by awed breaths.

What happens is not important  
Feel the echo in your heart  
Give away everything  
All words, all dreams  
All the water of the ocean!  
What will be left in the end?  
Only an owner's empty shell  
On an empty shore!

(Binoy Barman writes poetry and teaches English at Daffodil International University)



# Two Untitled Poems

SABRINA BINTE MASUD

1.  
In this borderland  
the sky has a clear ownership,  
and boundaries carry sign posts,  
and I am running after the half  
naked gnome who stole the ladder.  
I was promised a trip over the  
rainbow if I could catch the  
little green man.  
But, truth be told, I am enjoying  
the view, a half-pint of a bearded  
bum, fumbling off in the distance,  
more than a glimpse of  
the promise land.

2.  
A star crumbling within itself  
Is tragic, I suppose.  
Yet, even if it was for a moment,  
The halo of exhaled star dust  
is itself a rebirth.  
Dying so many times  
in and that many moments in a day,  
and countless rebirths follow,  
is colorful nonetheless.  
So why mourn, if there is  
no end?

Sabrina Binte Masud writes creatively in a number of genres and has won international awards for her plays.

# Inside RADA for the First Time

SHAHID ALAM

Bret and I entered a cavernous RADA room, and not a moment too soon! What seemed like a thousand pairs of eyes stared at us as we walked in through enormous doors; only a smattering of people straggled in after us. We really were in the nick of time, for out of the corner of my right eye I glimpsed Nick Barter at the podium, ready to deliver his welcoming address to the 11996 batch of summer school students. Nick, the Principal of the Academy, is of medium height, has reddish wavy hair brushed back, a lean bony face sporting a trim moustache and a beard. In fact, he looked rather like the scholarly chief of an educational institution—quiet, unassuming and courteous—and not the head of an organization like RADA. I had met him a few months back in New York, where he had auditioned me (and a whole lot of others) for a place at RADA. His demeanor then was all that was stand-offish; it was as if he would confine himself to the principal's room and rather look after administrative matters, leaving day-to-day management and student training activities to the staff and the instructors. He was, in other words, the very epitome of the head of an educational institution.

After he had sat down on the floor in what effectively was the front row and I quickly looked around me. Nick's opening words made me look at the podium and take in his speech. He said the usual things that a principal says when welcoming a new batch of trainees/trainees but also talked about matters particularly pertinent to those enrolled in a short, intensive course and how to get the maximum from it. Most of us must have realized by this time that we were in for an intense but interesting time over the next few weeks. At the end of the speech though, everyone seemed much more relaxed. Only very soon and then would (understandably?) someone betray some bewilderment, caused no doubt by trying to follow out the activities that were to follow.

After a short break, I did a quick appraisal of my course mates. I was in the midst of an ocean of white faces, seemingly equally divided between men

and women (actually the males slightly outnumbered their female counterparts), with the occasional non-white face breaking the norm. Soon I found out that, except for two or three British ones, most trainees were Americans; they were followed in number by the Canadians. The rest were from Australia, Greece, Belgium, Japan, Bangladesh (yours truly); there were a few Europeans as well. In the next few paragraphs I will rely on both my memory (not as green now as it was in 1996!) and the RADA handouts that I still have with me.

There were 108 trainees in all (one or two would drop out as the course progressed) since I had been studying and living in the US for over a dozen years by then, I quickly became friends



with the North American contingent, who ranged in age from being just out of high school to early middle age. These 108 trainees were divided into 7 groups of approximately 15 trainees each on the basis of their acting experiences; the novices were put in 5 groups, while the other two were made up of people who had at least previous professional theater, TV, or film (or a combination of the three) acting experience. Since I fell in the latter category I was placed in Group 3, which had 16 trainees. One of my group mates was Ioely Collins, by then familiar to Canadian TV

audiences because of the title role he had played in the series titled "Madison". She had already been adorned with the title of Canada's Best Leading Actor BEFORE she had enrolled in the RADA program. Following it, she would act in several episodes of the serial "Cold Squad". She was also the adopted daughter of the legendary British rock musician Phil Collins.

Another group mate was Antonia Bogdanovich, who, I suspect, had landed a few on-camera roles courtesy of a good work up in the right places by her father, the well-known Hollywood director Peter Bogdanovich, the director of the much-acclaimed movies, *The Last Picture Show* and *Paper Moon*. Her acting abilities, nevertheless, were strictly limited. I got

along well with her though, as did most of the male trainees, but she made her aversion for the women quite clear, believing they were out to make friends with her for getting a headline to her dad. Which could well have been the case, given that in the cutthroat world of showbiz actors it is on the lookout for whatever little advantage they can get! The women were quickly put off by her attitude though.

Each group was headed by an instructor. We were lucky to have been placed under the charge of Peter Oyston. Peter was an Australian who had directed

a number of West End productions, as well as some fringe theater plays; he was quite an accomplished teacher. He specialized in teaching acting Shakespeare. He put all 16 of us through our paces. In the end almost everyone in the group benefited immensely from his knowledge, patience, insight, and teaching skills. Most of my group members were North Americans, with only Mina (Kucchi), Japanese, and me being the exceptions. Mina was a Japanese-English, or English-Japanese (I forget which!) but she spoke both languages with equal flair. She was also the interpreter for the large group of Japanese actors and actresses who would come to RADA each summer to learn about acting in Shakespearean plays.

As we were beginning our course, we overlapped by two weeks another earlier short course in acting Shakespeare. There, too, most of the trainees were North Americans. One of them was Maggie Gyllenhaal, who has now become an accomplished Hollywood actress. She has been nominated for Best Supporting Actress in "Crazy Heart" in the 2009 Oscar Award gala, and for the prestigious Screen Actors Guild Award. She has also received a Primetime Emmy Award and had won the Golden Globe Award at Best Actress in 2005 for *Sherrybaby*. I watched her, then only in her late teens, acting in that group's closing performance (probably *Antony and Cleopatra*). She was good in that role but an even better performer that evening.

Our instructors included Sue Leslie for Voice, Ian Reichel for Movement, Anna Perry for Speech, Ben Benison for Action, Terry King for Tumbling, and Tim Deenihan (a third year student), standing in for the regular Richard Ryan, for Stage Fights. Ian's classes were a blast, and I will talk about them in another piece. But that day we were about to embark on an intensive period of training, one in which time flew by like there was going to be no tomorrow.

Shahid Alam is a thespian and Professor, Department of Media and Communications, IUB. He is also an occasional writer in The Daily Star Literature and Review Pages.

# Government Employees of Bangladesh Another 'Diasporic' Community

YASIF AHMAD FAYSAI

"Take your belongings and head for the old dormitory. The dorm is a good one; it's located at the south-east of the college campus but only a little distance away—aid the Principal of the government college on the day I joined it as a teacher from the Education Cadre. He seemed to be proud of his college, its administration and beautiful location; the sparkle in his eyes shined till the L-shaped college building sat at the heart of a lush green landscape, bordered on one side by a thick forest and on the other by a small river meandering lazily out of sight.

As I discovered later that day, however, the "little distance" that he talked about was really three miles further off. I needed to cross a long-deserted Muslim graveyard en route to my dormitory. This was a two-storied affair in a place overhung with ancient trees, and home to snakes and toads during the rainy season. Our "next-door" neighbor happened to be "only a twenty-minute walk away!" There were reports that some of my colleagues had heard and seen all sorts of unearthly things at night, which made many of them change their lodging and rent rooms nearer to the college.

I laughed out loud remembering these stories later, even two days prior to my joining. I was in Dhaka enjoying domestic bliss with my family, having tasty meals, and laughing heartily at every little thing. And two days later, I would be living next to a graveyard, unsure of whether I would be able to survive even a single night in that very dorm. This is where my much-coveted government job had taken me to! I was supposed to be in that day when the imagined glory of the government job seemed to vanish down my cheeks. The irony of my situation was all too painful.

While I was grieving at my misfortune thus, another line of thinking got me. You could even say that I was quite appalled by my own snobbery at this thought. If the place seemed to me so horribly backward, antipodal to Dhaka life, I, for one, should have been able to adapt far more easily than others could. Was I not born in a village? Did not my grandfather ride bull-carts and smoke hookahs made of raw tobacco after an exhausting day at the field day after day?

my mind then. So, when the Principal pointed at the dormitory, my mind had taken the opposite track. It then went back in time and to a place thousands of miles away—Jerusalem! Stories of helpless Jews and their tragic journeys away from their homeland to other parts of the world filled my mind. My lips involuntarily murmured the word—Diaspora!

The word, of course, refers to the spatial displacement of people from their homeland. I had been familiar with it since my student days in Dhaka University when I had read books of theories and fiction from cover to cover and had discovered that displacement was a recurring phenomenon in the history of mankind; it had been affecting the lives of

lives; I understood that these employees on their routine peregrination from place to place eventually end up as cynical, skeptical of such romantic notions as 'home', 'origins' or 'roots'.

One can say that these people archive the memories of places they have been to. Rural life is as much part of their experience as urban life. Proximity to nature doesn't necessarily occasion romantic gush in their mind; sometimes, it may subside to an opposite spectrum of emotions (the first reaction I had on the day of joining was to pack up and head for Dhaka!).

Didn't these employees remember the dear ones they had left behind in their ancestral lands as well as the diasporic ones would? Didn't their eyes too mist



many groups of people and had changed their fates forever. Diasporic people had to inhabit multiple worlds, inhabiting the essence of different cultures; theirs were stories of trauma, of endurance, of growing doubts about the prospect of returning to their homelands.

That was what the books had told me. The real meaning of a diasporic existence hit me hard like a bullet then. I realized at that time, that government employees in Bangladesh are condemned to lead such

over in nostalgic remembrance of bygone days?

A year later on the eve of an Eid, I asked one of my colleagues whether he would visit his ancestral village on that festive occasion. "Why bother?" he said. "Dhaka is fun for my children; they love the place; besides, my parents back home don't expect me every year...and, don't forget the rush on the way back..."

Clearly, there has been a sea-change in the idealized notion of 'home' for some of us. As people are mechanically drawn along the ruthless trajectory of their careers, they invent and re-invent the myth of 'home', based on the options available to them and the livability of the place they happen to be in.

That must be why, in spite of all the farce and comedy of so-called progress, Dhaka, a place so steeped in dog-eat-dog ethics, has been re-invented as home for so many of us. Dhaka is the place we love, the place we hate. And though Dhaka has its paradoxes (not always too subtle for perception), it still has the generosity to accommodate men and women like us and nurture their many ambitions.

It is always difficult to explain the fascination that attaches to a place like Dhaka and the madcap attraction that people feel for it. And it is equally inexplicable why so many government employees—born in the country, raised in Dhaka, and posted to one far-flung place or another—religiously take the last bus or launch to Dhaka on Thursday, only to report back to their offices on Sunday morning week after week.

But there is no enigma in the fact that this journey is no labor to them as long as it ends in the felicity of meeting their loved ones. After all, these moments of bliss are like stops in oases for government employees as they trek on long and arduous journeys through a career filled with bureaucratic banalities—a fate not that dissimilar to that of diasporic people in history.

Indeed, the experience of most government employees can be quite overwhelming. To their bosses, they are late-comers to their colleagues' shirkers to their families, they are sorry tales of failures. But if truth be told they are among the most misunderstood of men in employment in Bangladesh; they are men and women living diasporic lives without attracting a modicum of sympathy from the people they so often work and live with.

My Dhaka life was all but over; my professional career was about to begin in one small thana-town; the Principal had clearly read my mind. "Quit thinking of going back to Dhaka; you have a degree from Dhaka University, got yourself a government job; now focus on your career; no point in looking back young man!"

"Thank you Sir" I said by way of reply.

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