

I was nine, perhaps eight. In a darkened room where a small television set glowed and sang, I trembled with the knowledge that I was the only person who had ever felt these things. That isn't entirely true, of course, but in my imagination, it had seemed just as good.

A bouquet of pink roses cradles a hand-printed card that reads, "Good luck, Chihiro. We'll meet again." It is only a mundane valediction unless one grasps the possibilities of a Finnegans-Wake-esque conclusion to the film.

Speaking to the *Midnight Eye* in 2002, Hayao Miyazaki professed, "What made me decide to make this film was the realisation that there are no films made for that age group of 10-year-old girls. It was through observing the daughter of a friend that I realised there were no films out there for her, no films that directly spoke to her."

And perhaps, in the distance, an old Japanese god bottled in a stone statue wearing the face and smile of an old Japanese man, like one of the multitude we behold in the film, thundered, "Let there be mighty

turned into an animal like her parents. Secure in the knowledge that the fate of their lives rested in her hands, the first inklings of an inner spirit begin to bud.

The delight in traversing the trail of Chihiro's shadow throughout the film is not in seeing it grow but in seeing it glow. It is in seeing her accept small kindnesses from those around her without reservations or questions. It is in her unassuming question ("Aren't you...getting wet?") to the ominous presence of a black-bodied and white-masked No-Face spirit in the rain and the kind offer to leave the door open for it.

It is easy to liken No-Face to that of the natural human spirit. There is something compelling in the beseeching sounds it utters in the absence of words, like a baby's inchoate verbosity. In its interaction with Chihiro, we observe an innate desire to understand and to be understood. Its transformation into a cannibal upon its foray into the bathhouse can be largely owed to the corruption that exists in it. Chihiro, as a child untouched, is able to recognise this and ushers it away from the bathhouse.

THE BITTERSWEET MAGIC OF "SPIRITED AWAY"

NUZHAT BISWAS

pen," and unto Miyazaki, "Spirited Away" was born. It did not go quite like that, however. Unscripted and sprawling, the plot was gradually brought to life through a series of Miyazaki's exclusively hand-drawn storyboards.

Chihiro is 10 when she finds herself sullen and swaddled in a car seat to a home unknown. On the way, her father loses the way, veering them onto a dirt path that leads to a tunnel, where the wind flows in than out. Past the tunnel, they find themselves, as Chihiro's father rightly conjectures, at an amusement park, possibly abandoned, like one of many, due to the recession in the economy.

It is an interesting comment, as is the one about the construction of a river seen to be hidden under a spread of boulders, which has been put on hold. In the green fields on the side, we catch glimpses of small houses, looking entirely out of place. None of it is coincidental. In an interview at Edo Tokyo Tatemono (a park with Japanese houses and shops from the Meiji and Taisho era), Miyazaki said, "I think we have forgotten the life, the buildings, and the streets we used to have not so long ago...for example, a life in that house you see there (points at one of the buildings in the park) was a modest one. They ate a small amount of food, enough to fit on a small table in a tiny room. Everyone thinks our problems today are the big problems we have for the first time in the world. But I think we just aren't used to them, what with the recession and all."

A series of unfortunate events leads to Chihiro's parents turning into pigs after gorging on various delicacies and leave Chihiro alone to fend for herself in a place where dusk brings with it the spirits of Japanese gods. Like quicksilver, her limbs begin to turn opaque and in sweeps the green-eyed, green-haired river god, Haku, who gives her a pill that prevents her erasure from the world of the living.

Then to the bathhouse we go, which is ruled by the iron fist of a sorceress named Yubaba. The bathhouse does not welcome humans and under Haku's strict guidance, Chihiro fumbles down a flight of stairs to the boiler room where old Kamaji, the herb-grinder, works. Chihiro must secure an apprenticeship or risk being



Once Chihiro finds Haku courting death from wounds sustained during his theft of a magic seal from Yubaba's sister, a formidable sorceress called Zeniba, the film reaches its climax. Remarkably, it is not merely the hope for an antidote that compels Chihiro to take a one-way train to Zeniba's home but also a desire to deliver a sincere apology for the actions of her friend.

In this near-penultimate scene, the motif of the train which circulates from the very beginning of the film is at long last exorcised. The scene unfolds in silence, with the exception of Joe Hisaishi's beautifully composed instrumental track which plays a rhythm that is soft with melancholy in the backdrop of a freshly-peeled

sky, pink as after a sunset. Owing to the tracks' submergence under water, the train seems to glide over the cerulean ocean like a low-flying seagull. The faceless and lipless figures of spirits, thick and black like tar, in coats and hats and scarves, who occupy seats across from Chihiro and No-Face; the lone house; and the father and daughter waiting at a deserted stop, are weaved by a keen and genuine eye for detail and only further elevates the scene to an aching poignancy. "Spirited Away" does not bear the markings of a Shakespearean tragedy but this brief interval is strangely reminiscent of a catharsis.

It is night when the journey concludes. Soon, Haku will arrive, well-rested and in no need for an antidote after all, but till then, Chihiro enjoys tea and cake with Zeniba. As they bid farewell, we realise that the excursion has not been for naught; No-Face will now take up work as Zeniba's apprentice.

As Chihiro rides on Haku's back who has been transformed into a dragon, she tells him a story about a river named Kohaku and a little girl who had once fallen into it. In giving back his name, Chihiro opens the path to freedom. There is an underlying implication that the destruction of the river by man had left the river god without hearth or might. Its devastation is further heightened by the sight of tears of a simultaneous joy and despair, of the pair, hanging like crystallised dewdrops in the air above the free ocean.

The film segues into the penultimate scene where Chihiro wins her parents' freedom as well as hers by answering a riddle that will yield simply only to a child's mind. Kohaku and Chihiro's parting, coloured slightly melancholic, concludes with a promise to "meet each other again", thus knotting two ends of a thread

run loose from the introductory scene of the film. You may call it hope, but all I see when Chihiro returns her gaze to the tunnel is the knowledge that it will be a very, very long wait indeed.

I find myself nursing the ache of a tooth gone slightly more bittersweet after every re-viewing. I suppose, I too imagine myself neither a damsel-distressed nor damsel-errant, but mostly, as Miyazaki promised, one who will grow up to be "a charming woman", and believe that I am the only person in the world who has ever felt these things. Perhaps you do too.

Nuzhat Biswas is the oft-curious hyphen betwixt an incurable humanist.

| FILM |

| EXHIBITION |

"*E to khabar pabi, shesh korte parbi na* (You'll get so much food, you won't be able to finish it)." This was the promise that broke down the defences of the indigenous community at Longadu. In an act of defiance, they had initially refused government aid after the arson attack by Bengali settlers that left 224 houses ravaged, according to government figures. Their food stores burnt to a crisp, their children starving, they had no choice but to accept the 30 kg of rice, two blankets, bundle of tin, BDT 6,000 in cash, and the promise of more to come offered by the very authorities they felt betrayed by. But it was simply not to be. The last time they received aid was July 12. Ever since, not a grain of food has been sent to the families, still homeless, and now with nothing to eat.

"After the landslide, it became all too clear where the aid was headed. Of course there would be an inclination to send relief to the Bengalis," says Mrittika Kamal, Director of Terracotta Creatives and one of the curators of Phoenix of Longadu, a charity exhibition, held between October 16 and 19 at Drik Gallery, dedicated to raising funds for the affected families. "I saw children eating nothing but potatoes from the forest nearby, crying for food. Families that are slightly better-off will share half of their food with those that are worse-off," she recalls from her last visit to Longadu a couple of weeks back.

Primarily a documentary filmmaker, she rushed to the hills of Rangamati after all hell broke loose on Tintilla, Baittapara, and Manikjor Chhora villages on June 2. She'd been planning the exhibition ever since.

"But pictures and footage were simply not enough to open up the public's eyes to the horror and sheer extent of the destruction," Mrittika explains. She and her collaborators returned not only with film and photos, but pieces of the carnage, which constitute the seven installations on display at the gallery. A charred children's bicycle leans in an alcove on the third floor. Further inside sits a burnt sewing machine, perhaps once someone's only source of income. Against one wall is a bloated gas cylinder, blown-up in the heat of the fire. Nearby, the fine china, once the pride of a family, lies shattered. In the middle stands a burnt-tin fort with molehills of black soot and rubble atop it weighing it down. Upon closer inspection, one realises they are not heaps of crumbled cement, but of burnt grain. Together, they tell one devastating story: these people were left to die.

Along with the installations and 50 photographs taken by Mrittika, Uzan Rahman and Chisty Kanon, over a hundred prominent and amateur artists, as well as teachers and students from the University of Dhaka, Khulna University, Jahangirnagar University and Jagannath University contributed paintings to the fundraiser, while the indigenous community of Bangladesh set up stalls of traditional wares, clothes, foods, and fresh vegetables at the fundraiser. "Binni balls"—a sticky rice and coconut delicacy—and "pajon"—a spicy mixed vegetable curry—were a rare and unique treat for Bengali city-dwellers.

What drew more attention were the photographs that Mrittika, Uzan Rahman, and Chisty Kanon have captured. Before the exhibition, Mrittika had told me about how the amount of aid given to a particular family based on whether their house was "fully damaged" or "partially damaged". The government

PHOENIX OF LONGADU

A tale of fire, fury and broken promises

AMIYA HALDER

had identified around 87 houses as the latter. They were mainly the brick-and-mortar structures whose walls are still miraculously standing. One such "partially" damaged house is depicted in Kamal's photograph "Nothing to hope for". Its insides have been smoked out, its roof blown off. The walls, although standing, look like they've come under fire. In Chisty Kanon's "Under the open sky", the remains of a roofless red-brick house, akin to the ruins of a warzone, look like they could crumble any minute. In Kamal's "Burnt to ashes", "Evicted from their roots", "Destruction", "When all is lost", and "Destroyed", where once stood



PHOTO: MRITTIKA KAMAL



Installation by Uzan Rahman



PHOTO: CHISTY KANON

homes lie heaps of burnt tin. And in Kanon's "Untitled 2", all that survived the fire is a metal door bolt, lying on the scorched earth.

Families peer out of doors of crumpled-tin sheds. There's a hole in a newly laid roof, which won't last a storm. Amidst the debris in "Nowhere to cook" sits a charred vegetable grater, kettles, and plates. Not a single one of these houses is "partially damaged". You might spot a stabiliser, but no fridge. If the pillagers couldn't lift the television, they burnt it. Not a single one of these houses is "partially damaged".

In a video playing on the second floor of Drik, a little girl in a frock tries to speak between chokes and sobs. It has taken her a lot of courage to say the things she has said—that they have nowhere to go, nothing to eat, no books, no food, no bed, and no hope. Because children do not dare return to their schools, which are situated in the Bengali community of the upazila. The indigenous families fear for their lives in those parts.

"One man told me, '*Je majhir noukay shara jibon uthechi, shei noukay ekhon pa dite bhoi pai*' (The fisherman whose boat I took all my life, I now fear to set foot in," shares Mrittika. Those who worked as labourers in the city do not dare return. The Bengali shop they've gone to all their lives, they no longer enter. Of course they have no shops of their own to go to. The attackers made sure to take out the furniture from the Bengali-owned shops before setting fire to the Adivasi-owned ones.

In fact, this wasn't even the first time Bengali settlers had launched an attack on them. The riot of 1989 claimed 35 indigenous lives in Longadu. The attack in June disrupted their decades-long efforts to rebuild their lives and renew their trust in their neighbours. They've become Bengali-phobic.

And why wouldn't they after these same Bengalis slaughtered, then burned their own? Mrittika's "Still burning" depicts a fistful of ash-bones—the charred remains of septuagenarian Gunamala Chakma. The deaf and near-crippled woman sought refuge in the Chairman's house in Tintilla. Kulin Mitra Chakma, Upazila Chairman of Longadu, says some of her last words, spoken to the attackers, were, "Why are you hurting me? What did I do to you?" Kulin had hid near a date tree and was helpless when they assaulted her. They stowed away the body, set fire to the house, and made away with BDT 7 lakh in government funds.

With no resources, no relief, and no rights, the families of Longadu now reside out of kitchens, in cow sheds, or Buddhist temples nearby. The proud brick houses, humble mud huts, and tin cabins all lie in ruin. In the midst of this chaos, books were distributed amongst the children, but they were given no notebooks to write in, no pens to write with. Mrittika informs that the funds from the sale will be focused towards educational materials for the children. But of course, this is far from enough.

In the spirit of renewal and solidarity, the government and the public must come together to help rebuild the lives and livelihoods of the people Longadu. Above all else, we must stand beside them, assure them they will not suffer the same fate a third time.

Photographs and paintings from Phoenix of Longadu will be available for sale at: terracottacreatives.com. Sales profits will be used to provide educational materials to the children of Longadu.



PHOTO: ABTAHI RAHMAN



PHOTO: MRITTIKA KAMAL