



History is Muse

S CHANDRAMOHAN

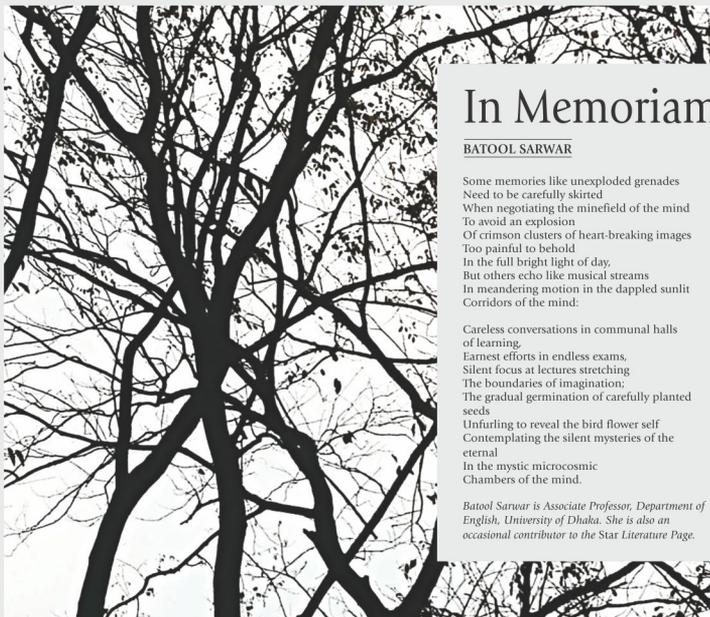
The muse offers herself in full glory;
Every historian knits her second-skin lingerie
With the needles of the moral compass
Unleashing new sunshine into the
Time's crevasse.

The historians
Unravel new erogenous zone
Like discovering a new continent
On a maiden voyage along
The contours of her nerve endings.

Her tongue during the stone-age was flint knifed.
Now her tongue is the state of the art
Swiss-knife with each blade a
Sickle, hammer, trident, dagger, swastika!

The sky littered with
Constellations of stars like transient poems
With every successive constellation
Drifting with the speed of light
To the holy grail of Hercules.

S. Chandramohan is an English language poet based in India.



In Memoriam

BATOOL SARWAR

Some memories like unexploded grenades
Need to be carefully skirted
When negotiating the minefield of the mind
To avoid an explosion
Of crimson clusters of heart-breaking images
Too painful to behold
In the full bright light of day.
But others echo like musical streams
In meandering motion in the dappled sunlight
Corridors of the mind:

Careless conversations in communal halls
of learning.
Earnest efforts in endless exams.
Silent focus at lectures stretching
The boundaries of imagination;
The gradual germination of carefully planted
seeds.
Unfurling to reveal the bird flower self
Contemplating the silent mysteries of the
eternal
In the mystic microcosmic
Chambers of the mind.

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PHOTOS: T.S. MARIN

FICTION

The Listener of Stories

SANJEEDA HOSSAIN

I
My mother says I have always been a quick learner; I can remember her stories well. I can recall them in front of people, copying her exact manner of speech. She should have been proud of me, right? But she loves my brother more.

My twin brother is a slow learner. He saw the first light of the world an hour and a half later than me. I was born at 11 pm on 24 August, 1988 but, he got stuck inside my mother's womb. He was just not coming out. We gave mother a lot of pain; no, I didn't but he did. Her labor pains came in the afternoon. My father was busy at his office, getting reprimanded by his Korean boss, I think. He was not picking up the phone. My angry grandfather got angrier and he called upon my elder uncle who was a medical student then. *Borochocha* came to the rescue.

In fact, my mother was under the supervision of one of my *chacha's* teachers, Dr Halima Ali, the renowned gynecologist. She made my mother walk and drink a lot of water. By evening, all the other relatives arrived at the hospital, everyone except my father. It was around 9 o'clock that he eventually came home. He made himself a cup of tea, bathed for half an hour, took the dog for a walk around the garden, and at quarter past ten, finally, managed to come to the hospital when he realized that there was no one else at home apart from the old maid servant. "God knows what this man was doing that night. I was dying out of pain and he could be found nowhere. He didn't even pick up the phone!" He provided my mother the opportunity of a lifetime of calling him a rascal.

My grandfather chased him around the entire hospital with his cane.

I was born 15 minutes after his arrival. My father was the first person to hold me. Since then, he has been retelling the story of our first contact a thousand times. "My *Guthuburi* is the most beautiful baby anyone can ever have. The moment I held her in my hands, she looked directly into my eyes. She had big brown eyes and the moment I saw my face in them, tears rolled down my cheeks. She displayed her pink tongue to me. She was so smart that she held my thumb when I moved it in front of her. She smell awfully nice. No one can smell as nice as my *guthuburi*. Above all, my strict Korean boss became kind when he heard that I had a daughter. Daughters are blessings for fathers, you know?" And he kept on telling people the proverb uttered by the Korean boss: "When God becomes happy, he sends rain. When he becomes happier, he sends guests but, when he is the happiest, he sends you daughters." Even today, the birth of daughters to anyone makes him happy.

After the nurse cleaned me and wrapped me with a fresh towel he got busy with me and again forgot my mother. How can she ever forgive him? There were severe complications. I think my brother, being as lazy as he is, just did not want to come out into the light. C-section was rare then but my mother got the best medical attention available. Babu was eventually born the following day. Thus, though we are twins, we have separate birth dates.

During the afternoons, my mother used to lie

in the middle of the bed with me and my brother on either side. I hugged her and demanded she tell us stories. "Go! *Go! babu, maa!*", Babu could copy me and make indistinguishable sounds. He hugged mother as I did but he could not utter meaningful words. She used to take us to a nearby bookshop in *Baliy Road* and buy colorful children's story books. She read them to us and showed us the pictures. When father came home from his office, I retold him stories that I had heard from mother. Babu listened with a serious face.

Soon people around the house figured out the disparity. "Why doesn't her son speak while the daughter is a chatterbox?" one of the sisters of my grandmother asked her. *Fuppi's* son Dulal could speak properly, though he is a year and a half younger than us. Even *chhoto chacha's* daughter *Renu* has started saying little things at the age of 9 months. Distant relatives visiting the house on various occasions teased my mother: "Why can't your son speak? What is wrong with him? Is he dumb?" My parents had to be child health specialists and my mother was already following their counsel by speaking a lot to him. She often used to cry alone. She locked herself in the bathroom and wept for hours, putting me and my brother outside. She could not retort to these people telling them to mind their own business and leave her alone. She could only complain to my father about what all these people were saying. My father's usual reply was like: "Say, what can I do? Am I not doing what I can? Can't you ever stop complaining and just be happy with your two children?" Either on his way to the office or right after coming back, this was the usual banter.

II
I still remember the story by my mother about the wise old owl. There was this owl that sat on the trunk of a tree and looked down on the creatures talking all around. The more they talked, the more he listened. The more he listened, the less he spoke. The less he spoke, the wiser he became. I wonder whether Babu was on a mission to be wise. He was actually becoming very quiet.

He observed meticulously every single thing that occurred around him. One day, he drew my attention and initiated father. Undoing the tie and the buttons of his shirt, grabbing the unseen tea cup and dipping an imaginary biscuit in it, chewing and sipping just like my father does. It turned into a game. He could imitate almost everyone. He copied mother, acting out how she would sit for her prayers with a her head covered, a glass full of water next to her and how she would recites verses of the Quran, blows on the glass and then makes him drink it. How grandfather would chew *paan* and eat the red juice and how he would chase the guard *Hobby Miah* with his cane when he did something stupid.

As tension rose between our parents, we created our own play world away from everyone in the house. At first there were games of chatting and playing cards with neighbors. We copied grandfather and the white bearded *Haq Shahab* who lived nearby. They played cards every evening and *Haq Shahab* had to lose and, if in any way he

was winning, he was scolded by grandfather. *Haq Shahab* never argued; he was frightened by grandfather's temper. Everyone in the world was.

Another game was where we would play master and servant. Servants cannot talk back to their masters, you know. But after a while, it was not fun playing with a dumb brother. At one point, you got tired. Afterwards, I would do a plethora of experiments on him. I would poke his arm with the sharp point of the pen and persuade him that it was an injection, a medicine that could heal his silence. He would wail but his eyes would sparkle. He would be eager to speak. I would make weird poisons and make him drink them. Boiling cabbage in salt water, mixing them with toothpaste, filtering that through a white cotton rag, then commanding him to drink it. Babu believed his sister after all.

My mother was scared that other children might hurt Babu. All of my cousins played together. They invited me to join them. I also wanted to play with them. Mother convinced me that we two were enough for ourselves. We had to learn to take care of each other. Children become mischievous when they have an angry grandfather and mothers can sense danger, you know. But I was tired of my dumb brother.

One day, as mother was sewing us new clothes, my cousin Golapi approached. She asked me to join their game. I could not leave Babu behind; he was glued to me all the while. Golapi said that I could bring him along. "He should join the game. We need a donkey for the game. The donkey is supposed to carry everyone on its back. But can you carry us all on his back and stum dabb as a donkey does."

That sounded like fun!
Babu waved his hands in an attempt to seek mother's permission. I sneaked out with him, convincing mother that it was better to play in a group rather than being just the two of us all the time. *Golapi*, *Renu*, *Fuppi's* son *Dulal*, me and Babu, finally, we were playing together! Golapi was the tallest and the smartest of us all. She became the leader of the pack. She took us to the store room and locked the door. No one else could open it without her help. She brought grandfather's cane from the corner of the room and gave the order to start playing: "We are all Arab merchants but we have only one donkey in our possession. The donkey will transport us from one market to the other." Babu was supposed to carry one of us on his back and complete a circle around the room. Golapi hit him with the cane and commanded him to go down on all fours. At first, it was her turn. I saw utter humiliation in Babu's eyes and the moment he stopped, Golapi hit him with the cane. "Donkeys are beasts of burden. They are forever silent no matter how much you beat them;" and the beating got harder. Then it was Dulal's turn. Next, *Renu* and finally me. I still could not figure out what was going wrong with the whole game. It seemed fun! Why was I attached to a donkey-like brother? I deserved a sibling who could talk as sweetly as me. When my turn arrived, Babu was exhausted and overwhelmed with utter shame. He could not even

cry for help. Golapi commanded that now it was the time when all four of us would mount him. We tried and Babu collapsed under all of us. Golapi hit him right on his face. Babu let out a soundless scream. He opened his mouth wide and, I did not know what to say to shut his gaping mouth. The very next moment I heard a knock on the store room door. Only Golapi could open it and she refused to. It was my mother screaming and I became dumbfounded. She called *Hobby Miah*, the old maid and my grandfather. They broke down the door and found Babu lying on the ground.

What had happened, mother inquired? Golapi spoke on behalf of all of us. It was *Guthli's* game that Babu would be a donkey and we would mount on him. "I said we could mount him one at a time but it was her idea that all of us together should ride Babu. When Babu refused, *Guthli* hit him with grandfather's cane."

Mother slapped me hard on my face. She took Babu in her arms, left the store room and went to her bedroom. She locked the door against me without speaking a single word. But had she heard Babu call her "Maa"? As she picked him up!

III

It was decided then that *maa*, father and Babu would be sleeping together on the big bed of their bedroom. There would be a separate room for me. Father arranged a bed, a study table and a cupboard for me, away from our room. I was quiet. I shunned the very sight of the three. After all, it was all my fault. I was consumed by self-hatred.

Two days of sleeping alone in that dreary, God forsaken room and I caught fever. My stomach hurt and I was dumbfounded with guilt and remorse. I lay down the whole morning and was unable to wake up. I waited for mother. Father came to say goodbye on his way to office and informed *Maa* that I was sick. He kissed me on my lips and said: "I am taking away some of the fever with me. Father and daughter should always be sharing stuffs." Mother did not come. I waited and waited for hours and hours.

Then I threw up. The whole world was spinning and a bitter fluid filled my mouth. The old maid came and cleaned the floor. I said, "Where is *Maa*? Tell her that I am dying." People came and went. They looked at me as if I had committed a heinous crime. Their eyes spoke: "Why is she throwing up like that? What has got inside this evil creature?" And it seemed ages till mother arrived. She picked me up from the bed, wiped me clean and changed my clothes. She spoke with a sullen face that I should not go near Babu. These viral fevers are contagious and he was still recovering from the injury on his spine. But it was wonderful that he was calling her *Maa* and calling father *Baba* and he inquired where was *Apu*?

Everyone had noticed Babu's talent for mimicry. But had anyone wondered why he never imitated Golapi? You can never know.

Sanjeeda Hossain is Lecturer in English at Dhaka University, currently on study leave to pursue graduate studies in Malaysia.