

# A Welsh Poet Foresees His Death: Rakhine Province, 1944.

JOHN DREW

...And alone by a heap of stones in a lonely salt plain  
A little Vishnu of stone,  
Silently and eternally simply Being,  
Bidding me come alone,

And never entirely turning me away,  
But warning me still of the flesh  
That catches and limes the singing  
birds of the soul  
And holds their wings in mesh...

(from *Karanje Village*).

As many hundreds of thousands of refugees stream out of Rakhine, leaving behind family killed and homes reduced to ashes, it may seem, and maybe is,



peculiarly insensitive, untimely and Eurocentric to refer to the death of one Welsh poet in their homeland nearly 75 years ago.

Yet the death of Alun Lewis in what the foreigners then called the Arakan provides us with an enigma that, it may argued, engulfs their lives and deaths, and ours, and may lead us to consider what is the real purpose of poetry.

Lewis was a young man from the Welsh valleys serving as an intelligence officer in the British army in India in World War II, a writer whose most striking poetry may have been written not in verse but in a string of short stories where a thoughtful officer protagonist, surrogate for Lewis himself,

is set off against an unthinking worldly subordinate.

Lewis' writing, his letters home tell us, is shaped by his experience of an India hostile to him as part of a "bloody, silly, ridiculous, red-faced army", "a fussy little officer sahib... with no peace to discover slowly the intricate paths to the universal tranquility that gives unbounded freedom".

## THE WONDER OF ORDINARY LIFE

Gradually, the serious purposes of India creep up on Lewis. Days at a time out on reconnaissance in Mahratta hill country, "a voyage into the unknown", he will never be just English or Welsh again, he says. He experiences the "Marco Polo wonder of ordinary life", picking up enough of the local dialect (besides his Urdu) to talk with villagers, but always with room, too, for the aboriginals seen flitting through the trees and the small creatures, birds and insects, especially the moths with which he identifies.

He could travel this way for years, he says. The only place worth going to is the jungle for the deep brooding silences there are necessary to the trade of poetry. The people are a constant source of wonderment to him, strange and individual and unlike "our closed swift little Western world". It is an India which provokes him to take up the intolerable struggle to find how he can reconcile the single poetic theme of the passion of Love and the coldness of Death, and what survives it.

The peasants, their villages festal with lush rains, make him feel tranquil, although (significantly) he says he could not "feel the same tranquility in the starving villages of Bengal where there are such dreadful sights of human destitution". As he says, he is not "of the Churchill school".

For Lewis, India is "an amazing and spectacular land but something has gone wrong at the root of it" and this feeling he identifies with the hostility towards the British occupiers. This may be what frustrates his attempt to write poems about India that reflect his sense of wonder (even the joys of Holi elude him). His letters tell a happier story.

Lewis is influenced by the best English writers on India. With Forster he shares a sense of the Indian landscape as being alien and desiccated and with him, too, an attendant dislike of snobbish and unimaginative Anglo-Indian attitudes. A reading of the more pastoral Edward Thompson causes him to wish he had come to India not as a soldier but as a teacher, a doctor or social worker.

He admires especially the editors of the journal, *Man in India*, Verrier Elwin, who lives simply among "the hill tribes of Bengal" translating their songs and poems (Lewis imagines meeting him

would be like "seeing a bit of God"), and W.G. Archer, known for his translations of Chandidas and Vidyapati and other saint-singers, who invites him to visit them.

After another festival in another village, a villager takes him out to show him the edible roots and fruits. Hearing the villagers at their prayers he wishes to be among them and of them, away from "the hyper-civilized world". In the rhythm and clangor and steady chant of their music in a festival in honor of Ganpati, he hears a rhythm of many universes and real truths. The peasants involve him in their puja; their simple greeting, he says, reveal a humanity that imperialism and snobbery haven't spoiled.

## SHORT STORIES

Perhaps Ganesh was removing some of the obstacles that had hitherto frustrated his passage?

For a moment, Lewis believes he may have within him a "more massive" piece of writing on contemporary India and the British presence. His point of departure for this is the short story he regards as more "personal and rhapsodic", "The Orange Grove".

In "The Orange Grove", the putative Lewis officer is left, like King Vikramaditya, carrying a corpse after nationalists kill his driver, already consumed by self-loathing and hatred but also haunted by the dream of an ideal co-operative in Palestine.

The officer is out in Mahratta country, somewhere in central India, several hundred miles from the nearest cantonment, and he is lost. He stalls his lorry in a river, and a band of gypsies are persuaded to take charge of the corpse. The story concludes: "Maybe, they weren't going anywhere much, except perhaps to some pasture, to some well".

And that's it, a passage to "bewildering" India. No wonder Lewis remains open to all that India can offer him, including "the sudden blundering of moths". Are we to understand that his story reflects (as his protagonist experiences) "one of the enlargements of the imagination that come once or perhaps twice to a man, and recreate him subtly and profoundly"?

His mind is going native, Lewis thinks. His own experience of life and writing he must keep inextricably intertwined. If he gets too far away from the thing the thought becomes flabby and invalid; truth is in the texture of a man's life; his integrity.

But then, just as Lewis feels his writing is on the edge of something big, he feels a phase of his life is at an end. A climactic is near. A voice tells him not to try and write any more.

Early in 1943, aged 28, he refuses promotion in order to go to the front to experience action with his own young Welsh compatriots in the Arakan,

Rakhine province. He arrives in Cox's Bazar while the war is still in balance between two armies that (as we now know) both include Indian soldiers fighting to liberate India from British rule, the one directly though losing, the other indirectly through winning.

We can determine how Lewis would have felt about either Indian army from a story he wrote earlier called "The Raid". His officer surrogate digs out of hiding in a Maharashtrian village hut a nationalist who has killed three British soldiers. The officer feels sorry for the young man they are taking to his death, sick and probably a student. "What did you do it for, mate?" asks one soldier. "For my country", the young man replies. Another soldier observes: "Everybody says that. Beats me".

It doesn't, of course, beat the writer of the story. He has little sympathy with the army, its hierarchies or its purposes. He is temperamentally a pacifist, schooled in the poetry of the English poets of the First World War, especially his favorite Edward Thomas, joining up himself only on account of the fascism of the Axis powers, though also driven perhaps by some further impulse.

## CELTIC BARDS & INDIAN PHILOSOPHERS

There is a poem by Yeats, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death": "I know that I shall meet my fate/ Somewhere among the clouds above/ Those that I fight I do not hate/ Those that I guard I do not love...". The airman is driven by "a lonely impulse of delight..." Lewis's lonely detachment is similar to that of the airman but delight is not the word for the impulse driving him.

Yeats was particularly attracted by two Upanishads and it is the same two that Lewis refers to in another story concerning the death that war brings about, "The Earth is a Syllable". This time, it is the putative Lewis figure who is dying while his ambulance driver prattles on about worldly matters.

The story takes its title from the opening line of the *Mandukya Upanishad*, in which we learn that those who progressively refine their consciousness through waking, dreaming and dreamless sleeping states may apprehend (as three-fold time is superseded) how the mystic syllable Om contains within its utterance all sound, the Word that is the world.

The story also cites the opening line of another (related) Upanishad, the *BrihadAramyaka*, where the dawn is likened to the head of a sacrificial horse which, like the mystic syllable, is symbolic of the whole world. An understanding of why the cosmic horse has to be sacrificed for it to be re-formed is again dependent on a refinement of

the consciousness.

"Quit India, the silly fools. How can we?" asks the dying man in "The Earth is a Syllable", moving the nationalist issue to a new level. "India is part of the world. It's the world we can't quit". Finally left alone by the driver, he wonders if there is a way "you could avoid saying Yes or No to Life, and yet be free?"

His lamp is said (in an Upanishadic metaphor) to be burning calmly, there is "a translucent golden influence at the core of his being". "All striving is a blind guess", he observes, and now he is in the night, in "the common ground of humanity". He rises to enter the darkness under the hill that is neither Burma nor Britain and be with his wife. "The driver found him five yards away from the truck".

Lewis himself died in the Arakan from a shot from his own pistol. Did he, like the Irish airman, foresee his own death? This, and rather more, is suggested by fellow Welsh poet Vernon Watkins in an elegiac sonnet he wrote on the death of Lewis. It concludes: "...Ah yes, he died in the green/ Tree... O, had he seen/ In a flash, all India laid like Antony's queen,/ Or seen the highest, for which alone we are born?"

The attraction of the Upanishads for the Celtic poets is, presumably, the elaboration of those states of consciousness, known also to poets, where the materiality of a fragmented world is increasingly refined or "sacrificed" so as to render it coherent. Symbols such as syllable or horse are archetypal images penultimate to a further abstract state about which nothing can be predicated.

Watkins apparently assimilates himself to this idealist view that would suggest Lewis's life ended because it was complete. The final line of the sonnet (in what can be expressed only as a rhetorical question) speculates that Lewis had realized the ultimate state of enlightenment that (as one Upanishad puts it) permits a man to go free of time, cutting down the Tree of Life (according to the other Upanishad – and the Gita) while it was still green.

The last but one line of the poem has already posited the possibility that Lewis first reached the penultimate state of consciousness where he had seen all the many village Indias he had experienced and described as one All-India.

The challenge for those of us who do not dismiss out of hand the claims made for traditional Indian philosophy and Celtic poetry may be to apprehend how the men, women and children currently fleeing in terror the scotched earth where Alun Lewis lies buried are potentially included in the vision he has left us.

John Drew loves poetry, cricket, and all things literary.



MUSINGS

# The Idea of Order in Bangladesh

NAUSHEEN EUSUF

I don't mean law and order, in which we are woefully indigent, but artistic order, the kind created by art and literature. I mean the idea of aesthetic order, as in Wallace Stevens's singer by the sea and the night sky apportioned by the lights from the fishing boats, and what it means to think about such things in a milieu as utterly disordered as ours. How does one make a life in poetry—or poetry out of life—in the midst of such incongruities? And especially, how does one do so in English?

As I put together my first collection of poems, and prepared for its publication in Bangladesh in addition to the US, I could not escape these questions. Like Stevens, I am often drawn to the aesthetic and the abstract rather than being grounded in the particulars of the land. When I do write poems rooted in Bangladesh, I worry about whether it's authentic, or if I'm using the material merely as scenery or props. Readers at home may not find my work Bangladeshi enough, or out of touch, affected, or rarefied. It has to do with audience, too, not just identity. Not just who am I writing *as*, but also who am I writing *for*? Do I have a responsibility to write about Bangladesh, as a sort of citizen-poet representing my culture to the English-speaking world? How does one walk the line between being relevant to Bangladesh and relevant to the world?

And can the imagination really be free if one has to be constrained by these sorts of considerations?

And perhaps that's why English poetry in Bangladesh hasn't yet found its way into the world. Apart from the singular and stalwart Kaiser Haq, there is basically no one else to learn from or to claim as a poetic forebear. And even there, it's an uneasy alliance, since he's much more a *Bangladeshi* poet, a poet of Bangladesh, than I am. His is a virile and sinewy poetry of rickshaw clatter and market chatter, of tepid tea-stalls and biriyani bistros. Perhaps I should be grateful—since he's already done it so well, perhaps it absolves me from that responsibility, and frees me up to do other things. Maybe, as the next generation, I don't have to feel constrained after all.

I suppose I would call myself a poet from Bangladesh rather than of Bangladesh. Here in Boston, I recently went to a reading by an Irish poet who has lived in Prague for the past few decades. When asked if he considers himself an Irish poet, he said he's uncomfortable with that categorization, and even the Irish poets he likes tend to be the ones that resist ticking that box. "I'm not an Irish poet; I'm a poet of the English language," he said. And that, I thought was a wonderful formulation: a

poet of the English language. Or of the French language, or of Bengali. Because ultimately, poets find their home in language—or rather, they *make* their home in language. Because geopolitical boundaries are artificially imposed, and the national identities that develop around them are thus contingent and incidental. But the imagination knows no such bounds, and the imagination cannot be legislated.

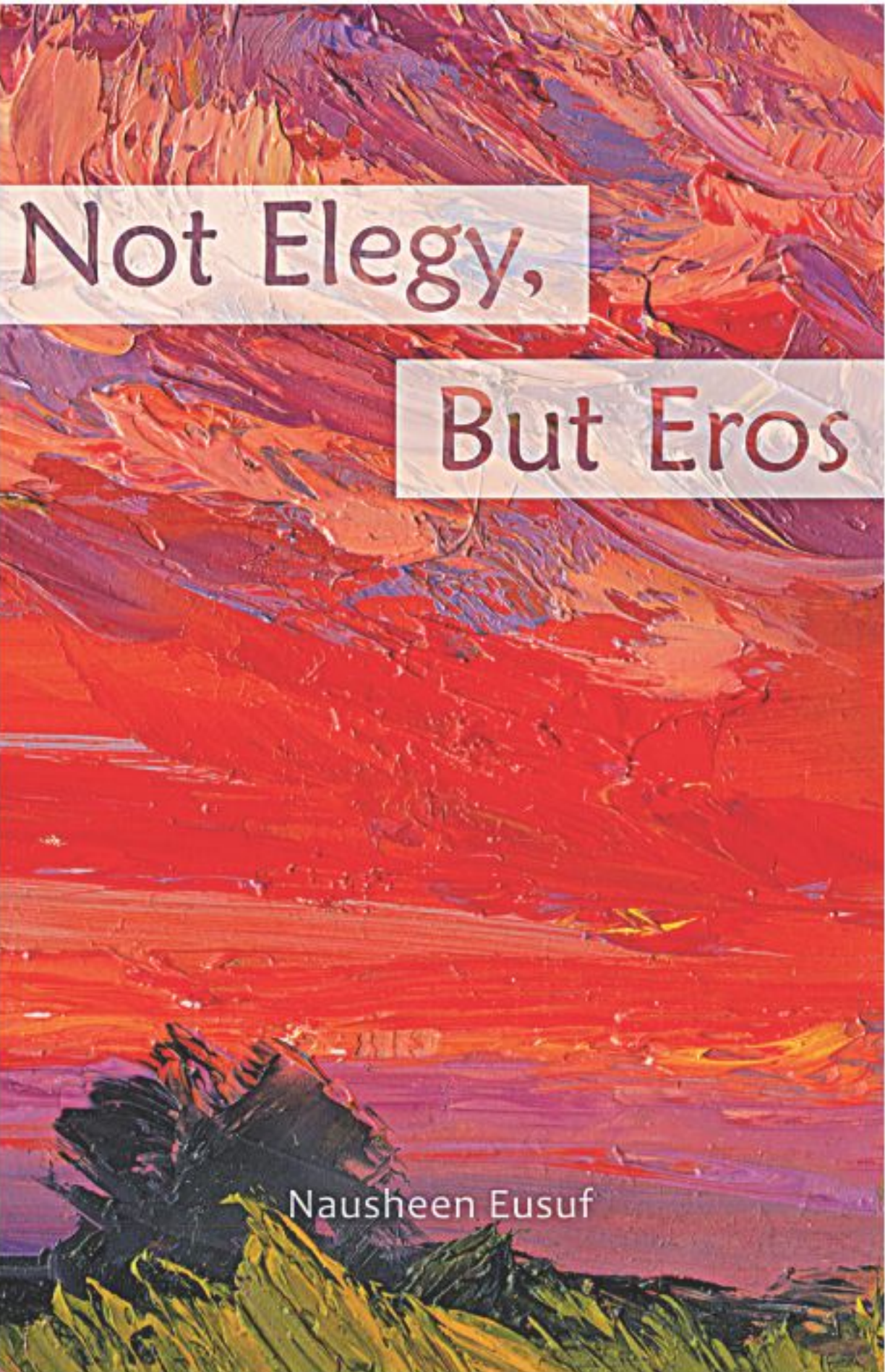
The same is true for other markers of 'identity' such as religion or ethnicity. When people ask me in the US, "What are people in Bangladesh like?" I'm always perplexed by the question. Well, they eat, they sleep. They fall in love, they fall out of love. If someone dies, they grieve. In short, they're no different from people anywhere else, except in the incidentals, i.e. the language they speak or the sort of clothes they wear. But that's not what makes us human, is it? We share a common humanity, and we share the same human condition. And *that* is the province of literature, whether it's literature in English, Bengali, Russian or French. The details of manners and dress are merely incidental.

Of course, I'm aware of the privilege that allows me to claim such universals. The details of race or religion, for instance, are *not* incidental for cultures or communities that are oppressed, their

humanity denied, on the basis of those differences. For them, it is tantamount to an erasure of identity, a form of psychological violence at best, and real violence at worst. I'm aware of the privilege of *not* belonging to such a group. It's only because these things are relatively untroubled for me that I'm able to consider them incidental.

What I'd like to be is a poet of the English language. But I'm also from Bangladesh, and yet educated in the West. None of this was true for someone like Stevens. His mother tongue and his literary language were one and the same. And yet, I didn't *choose* English as my literary language. Rather, *it* chose *me*. And so I make my home in language, specifically as a poet of the English language, even with all its power and privilege and messy colonial history. So what kinds of ideas of order are available to me? Perhaps ones that more tenuous, self-conscious, shifting, and contingent. Ones that don't make claims to any specific identity, but are rooted only in the magic of words and the power of the imagination

Nausheen Eusuf is a PhD candidate in English at Boston University. Her first collection of poems has just been published by NYQ Books (US) and Bengal Lights Books (Bangladesh).



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