



## MUSINGS

## EXAMINATION WOES

SOMDATTA MANDAL

With the examination season on, people feel pity for the stressed students burning the midnight oil as well as for their parents who, in order to maintain silence in their homes, switch off their favourite soaps and serials and try to brush up their history, English or maths along with their children. It suddenly occurred to me that no one ever spares a thought that it is also an equally stressful time for teachers, especially the invigilators.

When I had joined service in a college in the suburbs of the city in the early 1980's, the institution was just born. In the middle of paddy fields with narrow aisles, there were no brick and mortar buildings, no sanitary arrangements, no electricity, just three rooms made of split bamboo meshing. Despite our lack of creature comforts it was bliss for the first ten years or so because the university never thought of setting up an examination center in such sparse settings. As our college grew, so did our woes. It soon became the center for various university and public exams and being short staffed, there was no way in which we could escape invigilation duties.

Those in the profession know that the first hour is bliss because students are not allowed to leave the examination hall. Then the melee begins. Everyone needs to go to the toilet and come back with various kinds of chits -- some concealed in their bodies, others supplied by the 'dadas' outside. Some of those micro-xerox notes and mini-chits required finer skill than writing on a grain of rice but the art has been perfected. Being very strict, I became a terror for

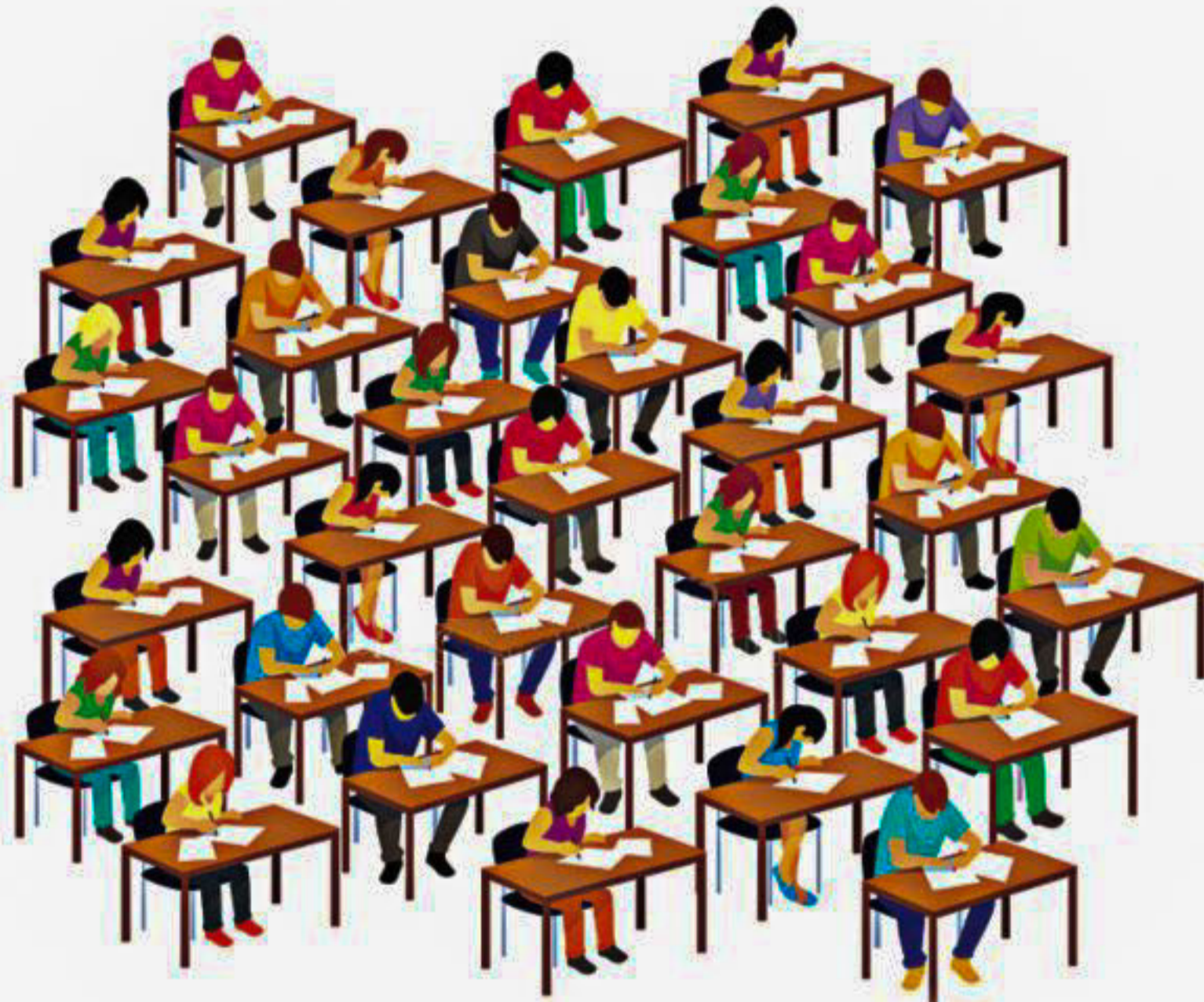
some of these examinees. As soon as I entered my allotted room I could hear a loud sigh in unison -- "So the first paper is gone! No chance of passing this time!" When scolding, canceling, or reporting against them did not help, the examinees would sometimes

Once a young colleague of mine literally ran out of her room panic-stricken as some one had threatened her "laash fele debo" in the true style of cinematic villains. Then there were the aged repeating candidates who were so desperate to copy that one

Others offered equally genuine reasons why I should pity them and let them copy to their hearts content.

Unaware of the enemies I had built up during the course of one university exam session, the students had kept their patience in tact waiting to take revenge upon me on the last day. At around four o'clock that afternoon, the OC of the local police station suddenly arrived at our college in his jeep. I thought it was a routine affair. As the exam ended he politely offered to escort me to the city. It was so generous of him, I thought and felt elated. Led by the blinking red lamp and siren, for the first time in my life I felt like a VIP. As we wended through the narrow path and reached the corner of the paddy field, I was shocked to see a big group of boys standing there armed with stones and batons ready to teach me the lesson of my life. It then dawned on me that the police had somehow got wind of the matter and was there to act as our saviour. A week later when I read a newspaper report that a lady teacher from a nearby college had been heckled, beaten and thrown out of a local train on her way back home from invigilation duty, I thanked all my good stars that I was saved that day and had not become another four-line news item in the papers. Since then, as knitting sweaters has now become out of fashion, I try to catch up with all my pending reading during invigilation duty, and both the students and I feel happy.

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even start threatening us. I remember having been called a *daini buri* (a witch); "*maya doya heen patharer pran*" (a heartless one with a soul of stone); and was even once instructed by a student to sit quietly at the end of the room and read the newspaper without lifting my eyes from it because the government would anyway pay me for my job. Fine logic.

lost against them in the battle of wits. When caught copying, a primary school teacher once told me that she had to pass her BA exams this time otherwise she would lose her job as assistant headmistress. Surely I would not want that. Another man stated that his would-be father in law would fix his marriage date only when he produced his graduation certificate.



FICTION

## PITY

J. MALCOLM GARCIA

From behind a counter inside Tasty, her brother Anik's bakery shop, Hridi watches an old Westerner repeatedly tug on the glass door until he realizes the needs to push to enter. He has been stopping here every day for a week and still he makes the same mistake. Pulls instead of pushes.

"As-salamu alaykum," the Westerner greets her with a slight bow of his head as he covers his heart with his right hand.

"Wa-alaikum-salaam," she responds, averting her eyes. Muslim women, as her father taught her when she was still a girl, do not look into the eyes of men they don't know.

The Westerner orders coffee. Tucking a stray strand of hair beneath her blue hijab, Hridi takes a paper cup from below the counter and drops it under the spout of a coffee machine.

At first, Hridi did not acknowledge the Westerner's greeting when he started coming to the shop, so surprised was she to see a foreigner. This part of Old Dhaka City is at least an hour's drive from the downtown glitzy, high-class neighborhoods of Gulshan and Banani, where most foreigners stay when they visit Bangladesh. Here on Indira Street, spilled bananas, green grapes, eggplants and squash when vendors' stalls make the sidewalk sticky as tar. Rickshaws compete with cars on the narrow road and buses scraped from so many accidents spew black exhaust and maneuver around the men and women darting across the roads at every unanticipated, fleeting break in traffic, the surgical masks they wear to protect them from the smog-laced air black with soot. Across the street, homeless families gather on blankets in Khmar Baneji Park where grass no longer grows and feral dogs roam and men squat and piss. The dense traffic and brown air and crowded sidewalks at times overwhelm Hridi so much so that inside the shop she feels submerged in an aquarium, short of breath and unable to come up for air, preserved only by the glass windows separating her from the tumult outside.

As she hands the Westerner his coffee, Hridi wonders, as she has other mornings, what brings him to Indira Street. He offers no hint as he sits at a table, sips his coffee and

looks outside at a boy holding an infant. The boy returns the Westerner's stare and turns up a palm, his eyes pleading. The Westerner shakes his head, a firm, unblinking no, Hridi observes. However, despite his refusal to be seduced by the boy's theatrics and the prop of the infant, the Westerner's shoulders slump resignedly as if the decision not to help the boy burdens him. The boy's face flattens into expressionless resignation and he rises and leaves, hauling the infant to his chest like a sack of rice.

The look on the Westerner's face, assertive, refusing to be taken advantage of and yet infinitely sad, impresses itself on Hridi as it has on other mornings when he has refused the entreaties of beggars. The Westerner, Hridi has concluded, lives with an exhausting sorrow the source of which she can't fathom but one that has turned his short hair gray and lined his lean face. She assumes he eats only when necessary and sometimes not even then, reducing him to the gaunt old man before her.

What Hridi has seen all her life, impoverished children, strikes the Westerner as something shocking and depleting, and his reaction, unique to her, leaves her discomfited. These past few days, she has carried the image of his despondent eyes home like a secret he has shared only with her.

The Westerner lifts his his cup and gestures for one more. Hridi fills a clean cup with coffee and hands it to him with a napkin. He gives her 20 taka but Hridi shakes her head. The Westerner smiles and nods in thanks. He sits down again and stares out the door.

Hridi noticed how the Westerner's forlorn expression brightened when she refused his money. His smile, she knew, would linger with her on the bus ride home, a welcomed relief from the dejection she so often sees in his eyes.

Smiling herself, Hridi cleans stray coffee grains from the counter. She enjoys working at the shop. Enjoys standing behind the counter taking orders and being in charge when customers approach her and make requests. No, we have no donuts today. Yes, we have Kalojam. Very fresh. If she disappoints them they

can leave. Hridi decides, not the customer. She likes that.

From a mirror beside the coffee machine, she watches the Westerner drink his coffee. She wonders where he stays. She has read about rich Westerners who retire and travel the world. Was he one of them? He probably had a wife who died. He carries a picture of her in his wallet. He was alone in the world without children moving from one country to the next.

Her father has told her that when she marries she will live with the family of her husband. He has begun negotiating with the father of one 19-year-old boy. Hridi believes she has met this boy although she can't be positive. Her father mentions his name but because Hridi does not remember him she easily forgets it. She annoys her father when she asks again and again, Who is he, father? So, she has stopped inquiring. There are other families who would like him to marry their daughters so Hridi assumes she may not know for some time whether or not the boy's parents will accept her. It is not her decision.

She prefers not to dwell on interrupting her life for a boy whose name she can't remember. Her girlfriends tell her that if the boy has no experience with a woman, nothing will happen on their wedding night. He will be too nervous and only lie awake beside her looking miserable. If he has experience, however, he will take her. And once you are pregnant, Hridi, you'll forget the pain that produced the baby and remember only this new pain of a swelling body and of a child demanding to be released after nine months. Your body will feel torn apart, and your husband may not wait as long as you would like to take you again to have more children. Producing children will become as normal as waking up every morning to feed them.

Hridi has told herself that being a parent would be much the same as working in the shop. She would tell her sons and daughters what they can and cannot have. No different, really, than what she explains to her customers. Hridi's friends agree with this comparison in a noncommittal sort of way that suggests to Hridi that they have decided to let her think

what she will.

The bell above the door rings and a woman with graying blond hair enters the shop. She wears a green hijab loosely on her head as if she just put it on. The bright blue T-shirt she wears has an insignia, Médecins Sans Frontières. The Westerner stands to greet her and they embrace and kiss each other on the cheek. Hridi blushes at this public display of affection. They hold hands and the Westerner grins wider than Hridi has seen him smile before. After another long moment where they just hold hands, the Westerner steps toward the counter and places his empty cup by the register.

Hridi takes it, her fingers brushing his. She thought she understood him. She had taken comfort in his story, the story she had created for him. She enjoyed the idea of caring for him and easing his loneliness and her own but she sees he has a life she had not imagined. Was this woman his wife? Fiancee? Surely he is too old to be marrying now.

The Westerner considers Hridi with the despairing expression she has seen him wear so often. His face fills with pity and Hridi has the impression he, like her friends, knows what she does not but unlike them he does not humor her but instead regards her now with an intimate candor, and she feels a rush of anger, but despite it, or because of it, and although she knows she shouldn't, she stares directly into his mournful eyes and sees her reflection, small and distant, aged and ghostly, yet all too recognizable, lost within his dark, wavering pupils, and she steps back with a shudder and turns away.

The Westerner and the woman step outside. They stand on the sidewalk, shifting to one side to avoid a boy who almost bumps into them as he enters the shop bringing with him the noise and putrid odors of the street.

"Do you have milk cake?" the boy asks without giving Hridi the courtesy of a greeting. He raises his cell phone, snaps a selfie.

"No," she says firmly, a hint of satisfaction in her voice. "Try again tomorrow."

J. Malcolm Garcia writes from Florida, US.



## POETRY

TARFIA FAIZULLAH



## WHAT THIS ELEGY WANTS

It doesn't want a handful of puffed rice tossed with mustard oil and chopped chilies,

but wants to understand why a firefly flares off then on, wants another throatful

or three of whiskey. This elegy is trying hard to understand how we all become

corpses, but I'm trying to understand permanence, because this elegy wants

to be the streetlamp above me that darkens as sudden as a child who, in death, remains

a child. Somewhere, there is a man meant for me, or maybe just to fall asleep beside me.

Across two oceans, there is a world where I thought I could live without grief. There,

I watched a vendor reach with hands of lace towards a woman who looked like me. There,

I fingered bolts of satin I never meant to buy. There, no one said her name. How to look

into the abyss without leaning forward? How to gather the morning's flustered shadows

into a river? Tonight, I will watch a man I still love walk past, hefting another woman's child.

He doesn't look at me. I won't wonder if I wanted him to. This elegy wonders why

it's so hard to say, I always miss you. Wait, she might have said. But didn't you want

your palms to be coated in mustard oil? Did you really want to forget the damp scent of my grave?

## SELF-PORTRAIT AS MANGO

She says, Your English is great! How long have you been in our country?

I say, Suck on a mango, bitch, since that's all you think I eat anyway. Mangoes

are what margins like me know everything about, right? Doesn't a mango just win spelling bees and kiss white boys? Isn't a mango

a placeholder in a poem folded with burkas? But this one, the one I'm going to slice and serve down her throat, is a mango

that remembers jungles jagged with insects, the river's darker thirst. This mango was cut down by a scythe that beheads soldiers, mango

that taunts and suns itself into a hard-palmed fist only a few months per year, fattens while blood stains green ponds. Why use a mango

to beat her perplexed? Why not a coconut? Because this "exotic" fruit won't be cracked open to reveal whiteness to you. This mango

isn't alien just because of its gold-green bloodline. I know I'm worth waiting for. I want to be kneaded for ripeness. Mango:

my own sunset-skinned heart waiting to be held and peeled, mango I suck open with teeth. Tappai! This is the only way to eat a mango.

Tarfia Faizullah is a Bangadeshi-American poet. The chosen poems are from her most recent collection Registers of Illuminated Villages published in March 2018. Her poems have been widely published in journals and anthologies in the US and other countries of the world.