



FICTION

After the Half-Time Interval (Part 1)

A Translation of Shamik Ghosh's "Half Timer Pawr"

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The alley is dark. Dim streaks of light trickle down from the street lamp at the turn. At a distance, the red light of the traffic semaphore glows. It is as if the man emerged from the darkness. Dark, quite tall. A bluish-black shirt on his back. A baseball bat in his left hand. He keeps his right hand folded. Probably maimed. His *topi* covers his face. Dark, flat chin. Bulging, large eyes.

Lebu used to be a friend. As kids, we used to play Cricket together. Lebu was adept at delivering off-spins. He could even bowl what they call a 'doosra' now-a-days. But that was with a rubber ball. And Lebu's right hand was maimed. Lebu would run, swing his arm and release the ball. As soon as his hand would be stretched upward, it would fall with a thud. Sometimes, the ball would bounce on the concrete pitch; sometimes it would keep dangerously low. But Lebu lacked speed. One could hit Lebu for sixes if he would take wild swings. You would even hit a six if the ball would reach the lamppost in front of Datta's house.

When Lebu would get hit for too many sixes and fours, his maimed hand would sway violently. It would be apparent that Lebu felt agitated. He would swear and curse every now and then. His eyes would burn with rage.

I had my first encounter with Lebu when I was out learning how to ride a bicycle. Lebu's Baba used to sell fish at the bazaar. I already knew how to ride a bicycle then, but I would get frightened on the streets. I would fall off, or hit a random passer-by. That is how I collided into Lebu one day. I fell off my bicycle as a result of the crash. Lebu picked me up. He asked, "New at learning how to ride a bike, I suppose?"

I responded, "You're not injured, are you?"

"It happens. I'll teach you how to ride a bike."

Lebu taught me how to ride my bicycle for a few days, but more than that, he would have me sit in the back seat while he would peddle around and wander off to places. In the process, he became a friend. A friend who later became a member of our Cricket team.

Lebu and I would sometimes go and loiter around the train tracks. We would keep the bicycle leaning against the wall and climb it. One day, after my birthday, Lebu had asked me, "Bablu,



you invited everyone for your birthday, everyone except me."

"As it is, I get scolded for being friends with you. If I'd invite you over to my place, Baba would kill me."

"Why? Am I a bad influence?" Lebu's question neither expressed a tone of anger, nor conveyed an underlying sense of resentment; it was an earnest question put forth by a naive boy. I could not answer Lebu's question, though. I grabbed a chipped stone that laid on top of the wall where we sat, and flung it afar.

A train clamorously rumbled through the chord line. The blowing wind disheveled Lebu's hair. Lebu said something more, but his voice was muffled by the overpowering noise of the passing train.

A few years later, Lebu ended up in jail. And I got into IIT, the Indian Institute of Technology.

The story of how Lebu ended up in jail is an interesting one. Lebu had a Dada named Fatik. He was known as

Kana Fatik. In reality, he wasn't blind or one-eyed. But he had given himself the nickname 'Kana.' Thugs had to have names like that. Kids dream of growing up to be doctors and engineers. Fatik's ambition was to become a *mastan*.

But to be a *mastan*, you need bravado, physical strength, or at least a firearm. Fatik had none of that. He had only learnt how to make peto, a spherical, grenade-like homemade bomb (bound with jute strings) that blasts upon impact. But according to Lebu, his Dada would have turned out to be a total *mastan* in no time. Lebu used to say, "A joint for you is the same as a peto for a *mastan*. First you learn how to bind a peto, and later you learn how to set one off. Then when it's time for the elections, you become a *mastan*."

Lebu lived close to the level crossing. Not exactly in a slum. The house was a little dilapidated. But the slum was adjacent to the house. Fatik had bound petos that night as well. He was supposed to take a gunnysack full of

petos and conceal it in the barren plot between the main line and the card line. Close to the pond, he would have to bury the petos wrapped in plastic bags.

On other days, someone or the other would accompany him. Fatik was alone that day. There had been a brawl with the boys from Atabagan. Someone must have been hit with a chain whip or something. That had brewed a great deal of trouble. The elections were fast approaching; the party's representatives had warned them not to get involved in such things. The opposition party may make it an issue. Besides, if the party would win this time, the MLA might become minister. Hence, the rest had gone to resolve the conflict while Fatik went alone, carrying the petos.

It was silent near the train tracks. It was only 10:00 p.m. Fatik crossed the tracks unhurriedly. In one hand, a gunnysack which contained 20 to 25 petos wrapped in plastic bags. In the other, a small crowbar.

The crickets were chirping. The air was chilly. His entire body was flinching. Last year, the girl's corpse had floated above the water. After being submerged in the water for three or four days, her corpse had become insipid, whitish and fish-like. No one knew

Fatik laid his crowbar down. He took out a *beedi* from its packet and lit it up. Some noise could be heard. Someone was sobbing. "Le halwa!" Fatik thought of running away. No, it was not the sound of anyone crying. There was nothing there. He must have misheard it. No, there was some noise coming from near the pond. Fatik extended his neck to have a better look.

There was something floating on the surface of the pond's water. Is that a saree? Fatik had goose bumps. Noise again. A feeble rustle. Like the noise of friction made by the movement of flesh against the grass. Fatik thought he heard the soft sound of bangles jingling. "Oh, bastard! A ghost!" Fatik said as he bent low, took out a peto, and aimed it towards the middle of the pond. A peto can do nothing to a ghost, but that was something that didn't occur to Fatik. Nevertheless, aiming a peto boosts courage. The peto flew out of his hand and got stuck in the branches of the Shimul tree right in front of him. With a plop, it then fell towards Fatik, like a ball. Whether Fatik tried to hit it with its head or not, remains unknown. But there was nothing left of Fatik's face.

On that day, at the *Shmashana*, Lebu had told me, "Sala, I'll teach them a lesson!"

"Who? No one was responsible for your Dada's death."

"Yeah, right! Sala, they killed him, and now they're saying he died while throwing a peto! Sala, I'll teach the party a lesson!"

Lebu's maimed hand was shaking. Lebu's eyes were bloodshot from intoxication. I couldn't look into them so I looked away. I had just gotten into IIT. I kept a trimmed beard. I secretly wrote poetry. I would be going to Kharagpur after a few days. I had bought myself the TOEFL books. Nelly from next-door simpered coquettishly when our eyes met. I realized that the distance between Lebu and I was that of a few light years. As I consoled Lebu while putting my hand on his maimed one, I decided that I'd run away from the burning ghat. I would not return home. I would go straight to *Mamabari*.

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who had raped her. Pancha had apparently once heard the girl crying there. Allegedly, the ghost of the girl still weeps.

Not a Review, but Words of Heart: On Nausheen Eusuf's *Not Elegy, But Eros*

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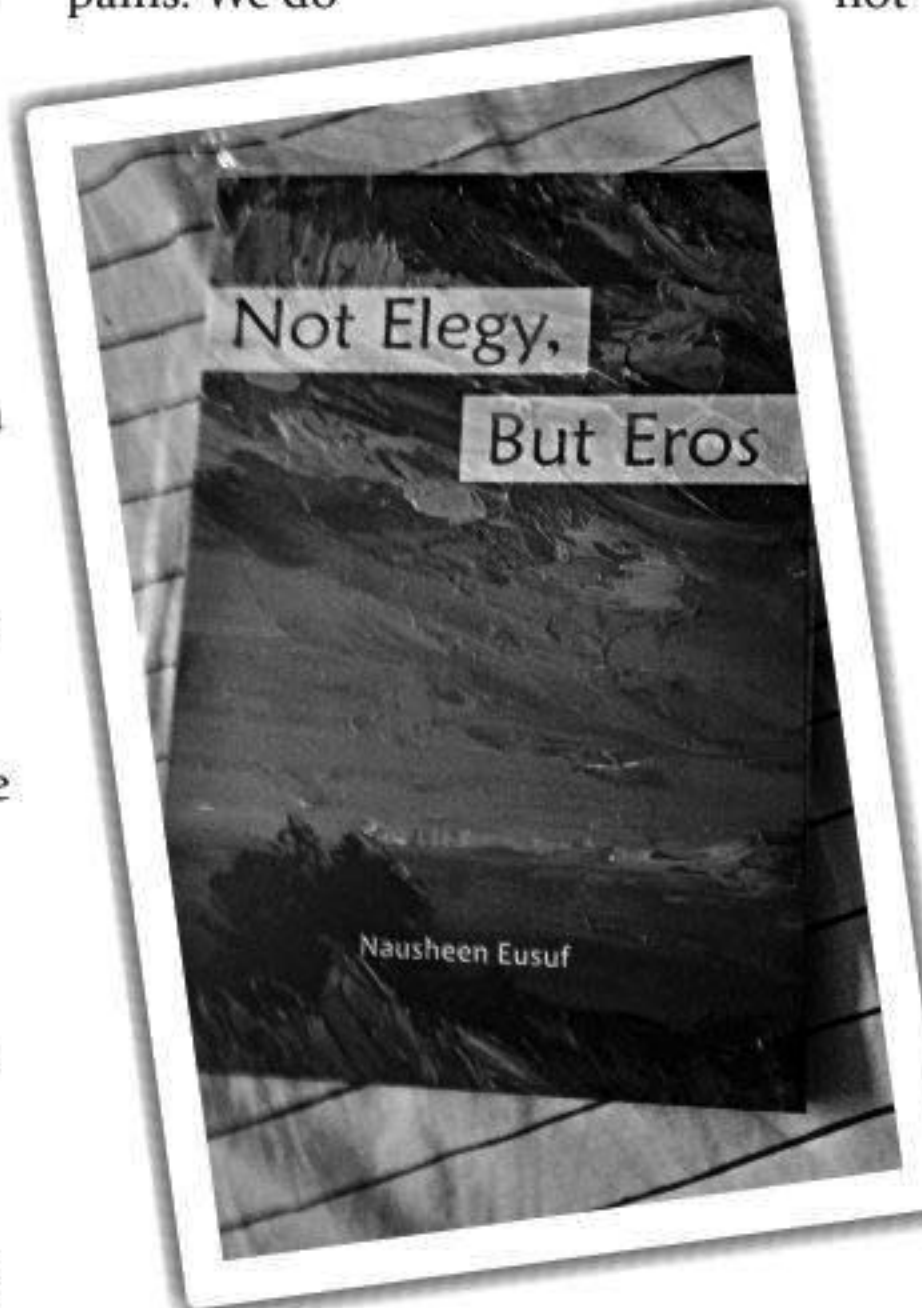
Life is an elegy, written by time. The instinct of life itself is elegiac, for it always reminds us of fragmentations and *jouissance*. Life reminds us of things that "are gone into a world of light," (as Eusuf writes in her poem, "Ubi Sunt"), stay "beyond the ignominy of the flesh" (in "Prayer to My Father"), or even "deliver us from our unfinished birth" (in "Prayer and Lament"). Nausheen Eusuf has measured life, not with a coffee spoon, but with a soul. And because of that, the *Eros* she explores is fluid, fragmented, at times too real, and at times, surreal. The *Eros* re-presents itself through her poetry as the Freudian 'unheimlich.' The presence (or the non-presence) of the uncanny flows like blood through the veins of her 48 poems catered in 6 different sections. Within those poems, she uses her transcendental poetic power over language and imagination as an essential trope to unravel the uncanny presence of absence, the life of the dead, and the words of the unspoken/unspeakable thoughts, through assortments of human's interactions with people, places, memories, objects, and time in a tone that constantly shifts from humor to pensiveness.

By negating the presence of elegy in the title of the book, Eusuf throws a new light to the notion of elegy as something uncanny. In the world she describes in her poems, the presence of

elegy is so engraved that the mere thought of its absence would bring the feeling of the 'unheimlich.' Her poems are about loss and death, disappearance and absence, sufferings and anguishes: some portray these themes in personal level, while others take it to the macrocosmic level; some of the poems depict loss in context of individual body, while some point out the violence committed over a body (and bodies) for failing to comply with the hetero-normative views and the oppressive ideologies of a social body. The title of the book itself comes from a poem, which Eusuf has dedicated to a gender activist murdered in Dhaka in 2016. Another poem, titled, "A Final Embrace," is a strong statement on the death of the garment factory workers in 2013, while the poem, "Prayer and Lament" addresses the issue of death and murder caused by political violence in Bangladesh. In the poem, "How to Mourn the Dead," she pays tribute to those killed during the terrorist attack in a café in Dhaka, in 2016. "When they awake," Eusuf writes in that poem, "let us honor the spirits/who step lightly through/the garden of our disgrace."

She has written a series of poems on the issues of death of parents and/or of relationships and on the death of the 'self' in the sense of growth or change. The opening poem, "The Sorrows of the Dead" uses a somewhat Eliotesque

imagery of a cat that comes back to the windowpanes of one's memory: "the three-legged cat/that comes to your porch at dusk to find/a bowl of milk," and Eusuf staunchly reminds us that we "owe them that"—we owe that much to our bygone memories and our past pains. We do not



need to write elegies on "the crap/one collects over a lifetime," or on the mother, who left all her worldly belongings to be sorted out

by a humorous tour guide narrator of the poem, titled, "Musée des Beaux Morts" (it uncannily reminds me of Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess"), who draws the reader-voyeurist's attention from the dusted photo albums to the "gorgeous vintage/ Singer sewing machine that she bought/with her first month's salary in 1973/which hemmed many a sari and stitched/many a matching blouse and petticoat."

Not Elegy, But Eros is a powerhouse of smart and intelligent literary and critical references. Like a magnificent maestro, Eusuf vivaciously integrates allusions to poets, theorists, and artists, including the Old English poets, Goethe, Shakespeare, Roethke, Marvell, Shelley, Keats, Eliot, Yeats, Auden, Whitman, Freud, Paul de Man, Northrop Frye, Wallace Stevens, Jonathan Culler, Hitchcock, Salvador Dali—to name a few. The poem, titled "Ode to Apostrophe" can be read as her homage to the English poetry as a genre, in which she has playfully inferred to everyone from the poet of "The Wanderer" to that of "The Waste Land." In her rich world of imagery, days stumble "into the gorge of" Salvador Dali's "melting clocks" (in "The Days"), and a father suddenly wakes up from his dementia (in "Elegy for the Man She Married"), like one faulty King Lear and cries out, "where is my daughter?" In "Watching Hitchcock's

Psycho," Eusuf sees Hitchcock's villain from a new perspective and forces us to look him in the eyes, making us conscious about our presence as absence as "both viewer & voyeur," and thus provoking us to acknowledge the uncanny mysteries regarding the presence in/as absence of Self and God, and the ontology of being and nothingness (in "Ode to Apostrophe").

Life is an elegy, written by time, but death is not elegiac at all; it is the very instinct of life's lived and living force. Death is a presence that can only happen through absence and then is remembered as a presence in past. The absence and presence in Death is "the rift/in the yarn that unravels the whole" (in "Poetry"). Eusuf therefore bids "happy endings to grim tales" (in "Lullaby"), hoping to "transmute/the known facts into the new and unknown" (in "The Sample is Shining"), "where nothing happens, but something abides" (in "Ode to the Slow Life") so that we are not offended (as the speaker in "The Overall" notes) when "it's all over," and "we return, meek and listless, to that great beyond, the earth's over-all translucent pitch, its all-devouring darkness."

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