

# The city is a letter that arrives late



KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

"I have known for a long time that one does not go anywhere. It is the cities of the countries that come or do not come to you. Cities

are fateful letters. They only arrive lost. They only arrive posthumously." Helene Cixous, *Ex-Cities* (2006)

Dhaka city remains the object of our abject imagination. I first began writing in newspapers on Dhaka city with a variety of emotions—outrage, fire, and certainly disenchantment. Dhaka was an easy target for criticism, and the tone of those first articles, some twenty years ago, was deprecatory and disapproving. Arguing that it was not spectacular buildings and swanky automobiles but the public realm that made a city, which Dhaka largely lacked, I titled an early piece: "Dhaka is not a city". Even my nephew, twelve-year old at that time, was not pleased with what he read as a negativity, perhaps even a betrayal. It was not that I disliked Dhaka, but I wanted to love her, intensely and now.

Most newspaper features and reports on Dhaka city are about its gloomy side—the pollution, the traffic, the accidents, the land grabs. At some point, I decided I will not write on negative things, for which there are many arbiters, but on what is possible. I am an architect, and will write as an architect by not succumbing to the gloom all around, but anticipating something better, something waiting to arrive. Like the sketch of a building plan in which the building is yet to happen, I hoped what I write becomes a sketch of the upcoming.

The condition is a paradox though. While I see Dhaka that is yet to be, the city shows me what it is. But it is in that flux, I discover "the politics of the possible," articulating the really real that can be achieved against the present that only appears as the

irrefutably real. *Designing Dhaka: A Manifesto for a Better City*, published in 2012, as a collection of my newspaper articles, was solely dedicated to a Dhaka that does not exist yet, the city of the really real.

In vacillating between the present and the future of Dhaka, I have come to love cities. I try to understand what kind of relationships are set up with places that we call cities, and how they are set up. I have written before in *Designing Dhaka*: "Cities are strange things, they are neither given to us as found objects like a shell on the beach nor are they conjured up in a dream out of thin air. We are not certain of finding them if we go looking for them, yet they don't leave us even when if we don't think about them. In the Latin literary classic *The Aeneid*, the hero of Troy, Aeneas, leaves home on an odyssey with an entourage to found a new city that came to be known as Rome. The Aztecs founded the city of Tenochtitlan on a lake that became Mexico City, after wandering over mountains and forests following a sacred sign for that city. And, in the Bangla *Candi-mangal*, Kalaketu builds a new city following carefully a visionary plan, and the city becomes a successful sociological and architectural experiment of community harmony. In short, it takes a prolonged wandering, and bit of a sustained effort, to finally find a city that one is looking for."

It's tough to fall for a place as Dhaka but then there are loves that are tougher. I was born and grew up in this city. My childhood relocations are like the northward thrust of the city—Armenitola, Bakshi Bazar, Kachukhet, and Banani. If condensed into a time-lapse imagery, it will appear as a slow progression from a literally tight-knit neighbourhood to an increasingly fissured social and urban pattern.

As I moved up the north arc of the city through its diverse neighbourhoods, I don't know when I acknowledged that Dhaka is a hometown for me. That one is born in

a place and it becomes a "hometown" may seem like an obvious fact but sometimes the obvious needs to be confessed and restated.

In Bangla, there is no word for "hometown," as it is used with so much affiliative intensity in the English language, especially in the American imagination. With "homeland" translated as *matribhumi*, the closest approximation for hometown may be *matrinagar*. While we sing so many songs for the homeland and weave dreams of the national future, we have

no such stances for the places we routinely and physically inhabit. For many such a place of routine inhabitation is the city, such as Dhaka.

In fact, the term "metropolis" may be more authentically approximated for *matrinagar*. The term "metro" refers to mother, and metropolis to a matriarchal affiliation for the polis, the city. This is borne out in such ancient Greek practices of creating new cities outside Greece where the fire from the main hearth of a home-city was used to make a new altar in the

colony city. Only after setting up the fire from the home-city could the new city begin—be inhabited.

Without ancient rituals, there is no easy answer to when a place—a city—becomes a hometown in our times. If *matribhumi* articulates our fidelity and affiliation for the nation, that is, the country at large, *matrinagar* may do the same for the city, perhaps with a greater immediacy. After all, cities and towns are where we are most authentically, that is, bodily and intimately, and in our practiced existences.

My incessant writing on Dhaka betrayed something—a love perhaps. A friend once asked me bluntly: Why am I attached to Dhaka? What is the nature of my affiliation? It would be too simple to characterise it as part of nationalism. Affiliation to a city is different than the one to a nation. If nationalism is a political, ideological condition, reckoned mostly by various abstract means, there is something more emotive and immediate being in a city. First, you are there bodily. You can traverse the place and take it in by seeing, walking, touching, tasting, and feeling; these are the processes that makes it a metropolis, a *matrinagar*. It is there we walk, we quarrel, we make love, we pay our bills, we wait on a rainy street trying to catch a CNG, we run out to the street when we are aggrieved about an event, or overjoyed.

But you can be only in one place at a time. You can imagine being in another or more, but you can be in only one place. While I was living abroad for most part, my mother chastised me about whether one can live in two places (to complicate matters, I had lived in three: Honolulu, Philadelphia, and Dhaka). The famed American singer Josephine Baker, living in Paris in the 1930s, made well known her love for two places in her famous song "J'aideux amours": "I have two loves—my country and Paris...". The writer Italo Calvino, deeply fond of two cities he had lived in, imagined inhabiting one that fused the different geometrical patterns of both. With greater

mobility and movements, a constant recalibration with places has now become commonplace. In the movement from—or rather between—the originating village and the city, the Indian writer Ashis Nandy identifies an uneasiness—he calls it "oscillation"—in which one is no longer at home in a place. Affiliation has become portable but for many there is always the *matrinagar* to fall back to whether one is in love or a disquiet with it.

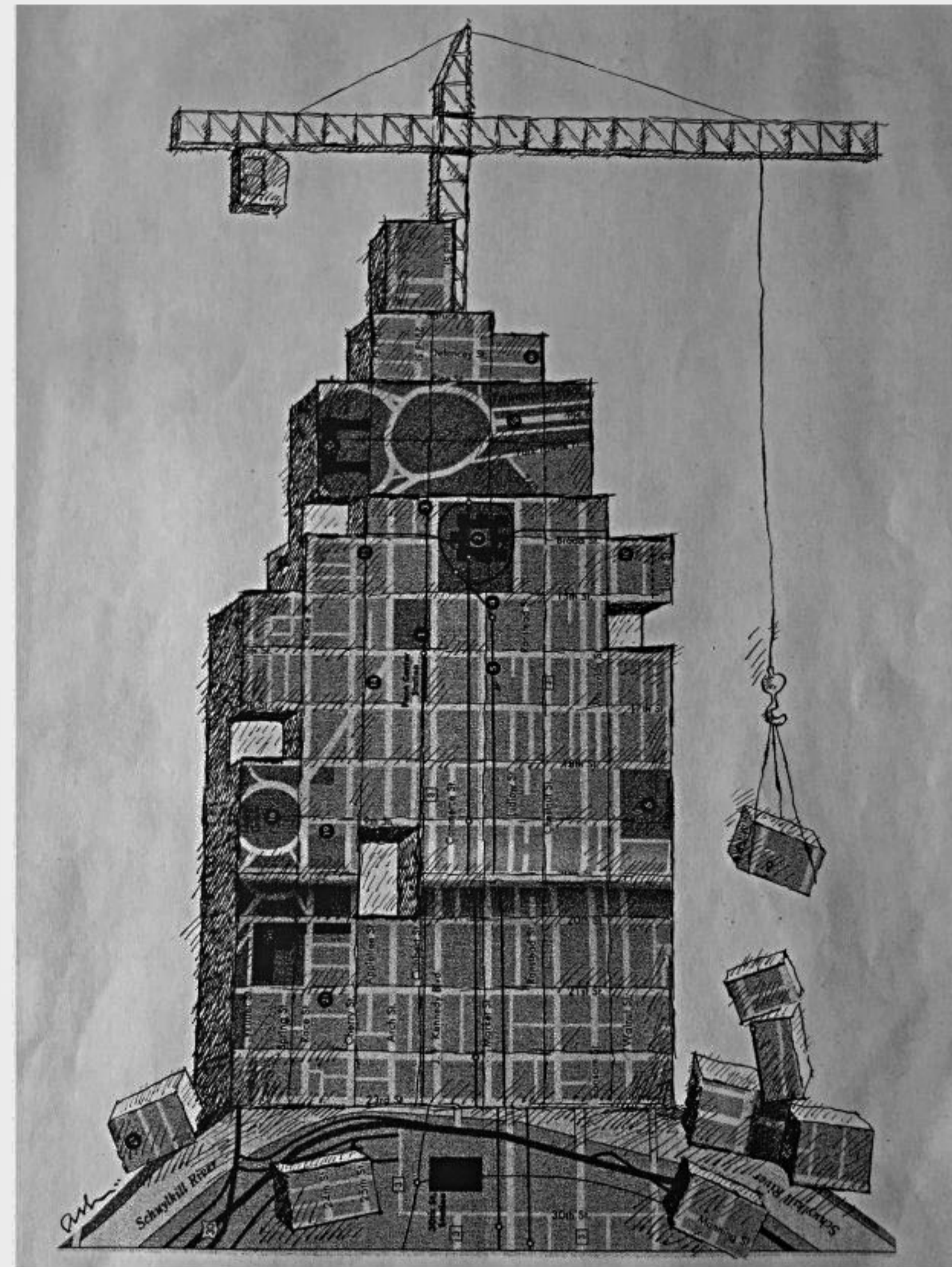
I have often wondered what is it about Dhaka that makes me want to write. Perhaps I wish to immobilise the oscillation of feelings, between a love and disquiet. Perhaps to desperately arrive at the really real. But perhaps the motivation to write is more fundamental, and literally projective and constructive.

As an architect I should be devoted to buildings, or at least, the magical craft of drawing. Drawings become buildings. What could be more magical than that?

I am an architect, and I have often been asked—I have often asked myself—why write. Building, drawing and writing do not mix well. But I also write.

Yes, I write—not just about Dhaka but architecture in the country, and sometimes about other random things—because it has to be written, not so much thinking what will come out of it, but one writes because it has to be written. Then letters are mailed. As if, if one keeps on writing on this pixelated screen, or sheaf of papers, if one keeps on mounting words after words, layering lines over lines, incessantly and relentlessly, words will become bricks and semi-colons will become mortars, and texts will have become buildings and spaces, then even if the city does not write back there will be those spaces that then can be inhabited. The really real. That's all an architect who writes can hope for.

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Drawing by author, published in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2000.

## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# How democracy is won

Anwar Ibrahim, Malaysia's former deputy prime minister and possibly the successor of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, writes how dialogue and the strength of plurality shine hope on the country's future

ANWAR IBRAHIM

It is perhaps indicative of our times that the peaceful transition of power by means of a democratic election is a candidate for "Disruption of the Year". The outcome of the Malaysian general election in May was the hopeful outlier to a global trend toward populist nationalism, engineered through fear of refugees, migrants, and the "other".

Malaysia is a Muslim-majority country where democratic values and collaboration between all groups made change possible. The electoral disruption was hardly what the world expected or what the pundits predicted, so we would do well to take careful note of what Malaysia's voters cast their ballots to achieve.

For starters, Malaysians voted to end the rule of a coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN), dominated by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), which had been in power since the country gained its independence from Britain in 1957. With the demise of BN came an end to the hegemony of communal race-based politics. Moreover, voters rejected a system of governance that was operating as a conduit for

transferring public goods and opportunities to private individuals and groups.

Under the previous system, the government had become an omnipresent factor in business and all aspects of social development. In return for what it gave through transfers, it expected unflinching electoral support, regardless of the circumstances or the competence of its candidates. Electoral feudalism was essentially the Malaysian way for the long decades of UNMO rule: voters were tied to their political masters.

The great disruption of May 2018 was driven by popular revulsion at the flagrant corruption that had become endemic in Malaysian governance. The figures are staggering. Untold billions have disappeared from the public purse through the scandal at the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) fund and nefarious spending practices across government ministries.

The arrogance and openness of corruption trickled down more effectively and extensively than the effects of any development programme. When the rich lavishly reward themselves, it is little wonder that those further down the pecking

order—whose living standards are steadily declining—are tempted to follow suit. The sense that the whole of Malaysian society was being corroded convinced voters that only radical change would do.

The roots of change, however, extend much deeper than one electoral cycle. The groundwork for Malaysia's democratic disruption was laid during 20 years of campaigning for reform. It has been part of every election since 1998, when I was summarily dismissed from government and arrested on trumped-up charges.

The reform agenda, developed by Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), gradually changed the political landscape. In the 2013 election, our opposition coalition actually won the popular vote but could not overturn the gerrymandered allocation of seats in Malaysia's first-past-the-post system.

The decline in national life eventually brought Malaysia's longest-serving prime minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, out of retirement at the age of 92. It is no secret that Tun Mahathir and I have had a stormy relationship in the past. So, when he came to visit me in prison to discuss joining our opposition coalition, it was clear that we had

achieved critical mass.

Nothing would seem as disruptive (in the sense of unexpected) as two erstwhile political adversaries collaborating. It required genuine forgiveness and a radical change in personal perspective, so that politics could move forward for the sake of the country. The Pakatan Harapan coalition won the election, and after 20 years of effort, PKR emerged as one of the largest single parties. According to our pre-election agreement, Tun Mahathir became our new prime minister.

The new coalition government has committed itself to a reform agenda that envisions Malaysia as a fully mature, just, equitable, and effective democracy. Ending corruption is but one item on our agenda. Establishing an independent judiciary, election commission, and free press, and nurturing active civil-society organisations, are also necessary to ensure free, fair, and open elections, deliver justice, and see that there is an equitable provision of public goods and services.

Another aspect of democratic maturity has been the move away from communalism toward genuine meritocracy, inclusive and just

to all of Malaysia's citizens. Affirmative action was introduced to help the Malay and the Bumiputera communities overcome the deficiencies they inherited as a result of intentional colonial neglect. But, over time, and under the UNMO, positive discrimination became an entrenched system of handouts treated as entitlements, which stultified enterprise and ambition. Affirmative action became a prop for complacency and corruption, rather than a helping hand.

Malaysia will now help the poor by offering assistance to those in need, regardless of their communal origins. The needs of poor rural Malays will in no way be favoured—or disfavoured. Need qualifies the needy. Making distinctions based on race, ethnicity, and communal origins has nothing to do with fighting poverty.

Malaysia's strength is its plurality, yet we have much work to do to restore the openness and genuine engagement of our multicultural society. There is much to be gained from sharing the richness and creative potential of our varied traditions, languages, cultures, and ideas. Through reform and cooperation,

Malaysia will become a more vibrant, productive society, and a model of peaceful, democratic coexistence that the world so desperately needs.

My perspective on the change that has unfolded so far is quite particular. At the start of 2018, I was still in prison, confined by the government's determination to prevent my participation in the elections. So, for me, 2018 has been momentous.

The coalition we negotiated—even with me still behind bars—swept to a resounding and unexpected victory. Within days, I was released from prison and received a royal pardon. Within months, I had stood for and won a by-election that returned me to parliament. And now, I am working to insure the implementation of the reform agenda and the fulfilment of decades of determination to effect real change.

If this is disruption, I look forward to more of it in 2019 and beyond.

Anwar Ibrahim, a member of Malaysia's Parliament, is President of the Parti Keadilan Rakyat and Leader of the Pakatan Harapan coalition.

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**QUOTABLE Quote**

**EDUARDO GALEANO (1940 - 2015)**  
Uruguayan journalist, writer and novelist

*If the past has nothing to say to the present, history may go on sleeping undisturbed in the closet where the system keeps its old disguises.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

1 Christie of mysteries	32 Whole range	informally
7 Hotspot offering	34 Kicking back	16 Sightseeing trips
11 "Green Eggs and Ham" character	40 Walk in the woods	17 Thesaurus author
12 Piercing tools	41 Golf setting	19 Good quality
13 Exiting in large numbers	42 Midmonth day	20 "Get Out" director
15 Enticed	43 Main dish	21 Light touch
16 Deuce beater		22 Stir-fry pan
18 Pile		23 Opposition vote
21 Lacking funds		25 Olympics award
22 Deteriorate		28 Taps players
24 Sept. predecessor		29 Cheap booze
25 Do a yard job		31 Talk at length
26 Poseidon's domain		33 Cats' quarries
27 "Jeopardy!" host		34 Greek X
29 Depend		35 Comaeled
30 Poker game		36 Mamie's man
31 Mechanical		37 Bruin Bobby
		38 Wield
		39 Golf support

**DOWN**

1 Braying beast
2 Mountain pass
3 French friend
4 Boat part
5 "Roots" writer
6 In the thick of
7 "Das Rheingold" composer
8—Jima
9 Winter bug
10 Follower's suffix
14 Impossibly,

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**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

T	U	F	T	S	N	A	M	E	S
I	S	L	A	M	O	X	I	D	E
M	A	Y	B	E	V	E	R	G	E
L	A	Z	E	E	E	K			
A	F	T	E	R	A	L	L		
D	I	E	M	P	L	A	S	M	A
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S	E	N	T	I	N	E	A	S	T
E	Q	U	A	L	P	A	Y		
J	A	W	U	N	U	M			
A	L	I	B	I	R	A	J	A	H
C	A	R	E	D	A	T	O	N	E
K	N	E	E	S	S	E	E	D	Y

**Beetle Bailly** by Mort Walker

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott