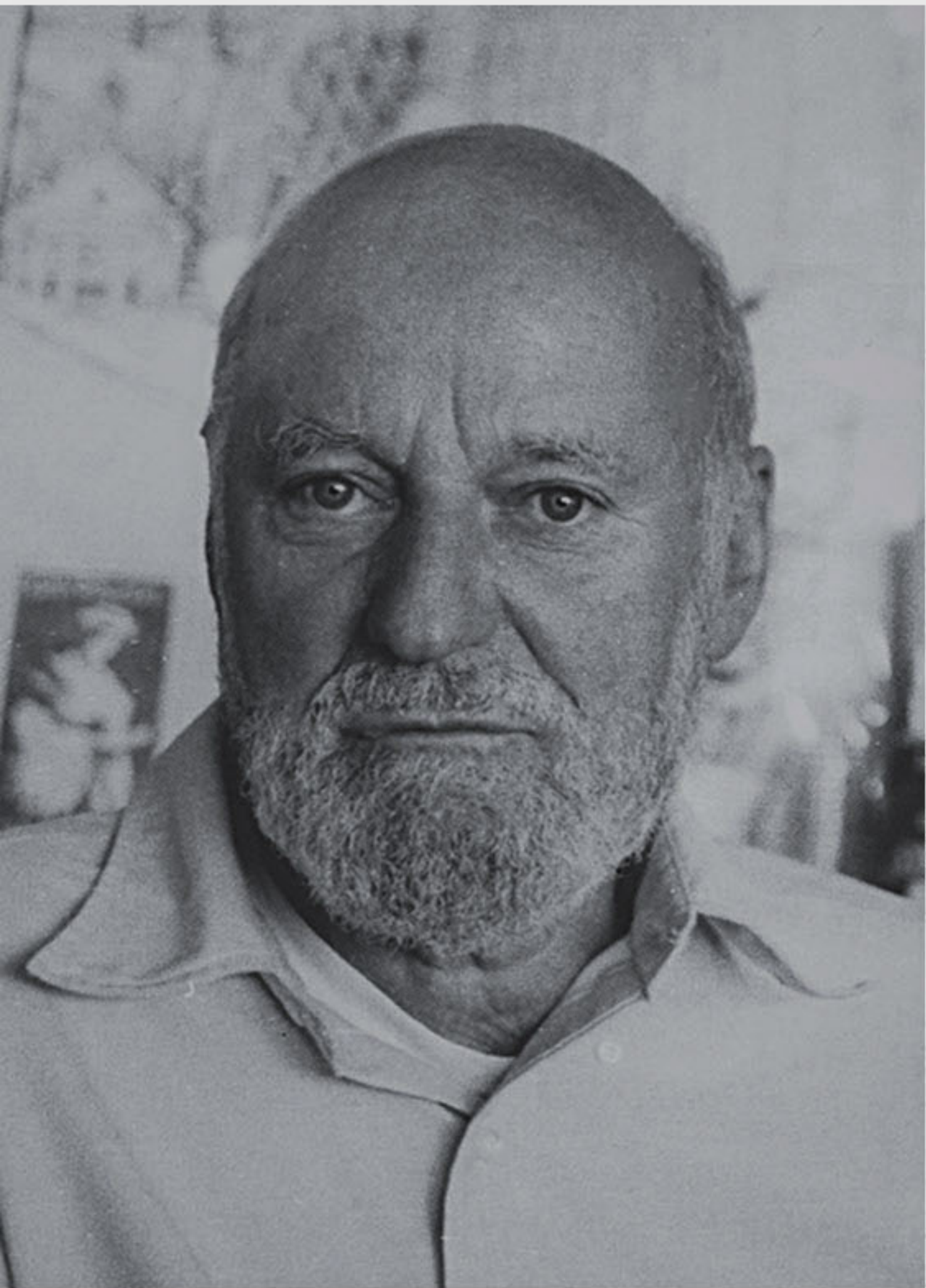


Lawrence Ferlinghetti Hits a Century

KAISER HAQ

Thanks to Google I have, at a click of the mouse, discovered that in our time around 165 members of the literary professions have lived to be a hundred or more. Of them, sadly, only 15 are poets; and of these 15 only three are familiar names: the great Chilean poet Nicanor Parra, and two contemporary Americans,



Richard Eberhart and Stanley Kunitz. Another American is set to join their ranks. Poetry lovers worldwide are waiting to toast Lawrence Ferlinghetti on his 100th birthday, which falls on 24 March. Elaborate programmes have been drawn up to celebrate the event. The

main venue, naturally, is City Lights, a Ferlinghetti brainchild, named after a celebrated Chaplin film; like its “sister store,” Sylvia Beach’s historic Shakespeare & Co., it is both bookstore and publishing house, and one of the most celebrated literary landmarks in the world today. As a sort of run-up, on the 21st it hosted the launch of Ferlinghetti’s new autobiographical novel, *Little Boy*. A host of writers including Joyce Carol Oates and Maxine Hong Kingston read from the work at the party.

Come the big day – tomorrow, that is – City Lights will remain open from one to five p.m. for a marathon birthday bash. Anyone who feels like dropping in to read from Ferlinghetti’s works or to listen to others read is welcome. There are parallel events elsewhere in San Francisco and New York. A month-long exhibition of Ferlinghetti’s art work is on show, and there will be shows of a documentary on his life and work. The reader can find details of the entire range of centenary events at the City Lights website.

My aim in this little piece is not to report on the celebrations but to add a modest personal tribute to the international chorus of praise. My interest in Ferlinghetti is not scholarly; indeed I am acquainted with only a small fraction of his many volumes of poetry and prose; but over the years it has given me immense pleasure and exerted a palpable influence on my own poetry.

My knowledge of Ferlinghetti’s life too is far from comprehensive, but even a brief sketch will impress one with his varied background, achievements and interests. He was born in Yonkers, New York, the posthumous son of an Italian-American father. His mother, of mixed French and Portuguese-Sephardic extraction, was committed to a mental asylum soon after, and he was taken by his mother’s aunt to Paris, so that his first language came to be French. The two returned to New York five years later, and after finishing high school he took a first degree in journalism from the University of North Carolina. World War

II was then in full swing; he became a naval officer, took part in the Normandy landing, and served later in the Pacific. The devastation of Nagasaki, that he saw at first hand, turned him into a Pacifist. Demobbed as a Lieutenant Commander, Ferlinghetti took an MA from Columbia University with a dissertation on the influence of John Ruskin on J. M. W. Turner, and in 1949 received a doctorate from the Sorbonne for a thesis in French on the urban aspect of modern poetry. He then married and settled down in San Francisco, teaching briefly at the University of San Francisco before taking up a full-time literary career. Setting up City Lights with a friend he

differing from each other quite markedly, though all are labeled “Beat.” Like all labels it has its limitations. It overlaps with the San Francisco Renaissance and “wide open poetry,” a tag derived from Neruda that Ferlinghetti likes. The latter even declared once that he didn’t write Beat poetry. I suspect he wanted to distance himself from the vatic side of someone like Ginsberg. Since that first heady encounter I have read Ferlinghetti’s poetic masterpiece, the best-selling (over a million copies gone) *A Coney Island of the Mind* (1958), the translations from Jacques Prevert’s *Paroles* (1958), and the exciting mix of prose and free verse in *Poetry as Insurgent Art*

I didn’t get much sleep last night thinking about underwear Have you ever stopped to consider underwear in the abstract The insomnia and the philosophic undertones of the phrase “in the abstract” hint at deep-seated problems. These problems are universal: Underwear is something we all have to deal with The Pope wears underwear I hope The Governor of Louisiana wears underwear I saw him on TV He must have had tight underwear He squirmed a lot Here we have a politician in a tight spot during question hour on TV: one of the small pleasures of life in a democracy. The distinction between public and private spheres breaks down in the modern world: Women’s underwear holds things up Men’s underwear holds things down Underwear is one thing men and women have in common Underwear is all we have between us You have seen the three-colour pictures with crotches encircled to show the areas of extra strength and three-way stretch promising full freedom of action Don’t be deceived It’s all based on the two-party system which doesn’t allow much freedom of choice Could there be a more entertaining yet telling indictment of consumerist capitalism and bourgeois democracy? Humour is perhaps the best weapon for philosophic anarchists. Looking back I can sincerely avow that “Underwear” was the inspiration behind my poem “Ode on the Lungi.” And so, tomorrow I will sit in a lungi and toast the laureate of underwear.

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showed remarkable entrepreneurial acumen, launching the highly successful Pocket Poets Series that published Ginsberg’s *Howl* (1956), for which he had to fight an obscenity charge in court. An anarchist in politics, Ferlinghetti has also had a colourful record of activism: anti-Vietnam War, pro-Sandinista, Castro-friendly, anti-nuclear, pro-farm workers.

Like many of my generation in the subcontinent I owe my first encounter with Ferlinghetti to Penguin Modern Poets Volume 5, which also featured Ginsberg and Gregory Corso. What an exciting fare in such a slim paperback! I read and reread the poems, chanted them, intoned them, even sang them. The three poets are also quite varied,

(1975) and *Writing Across the Landscape: Travel Journals* (2015). I see an intimate connection between Prevert and Ferlinghetti, in their valorization of accessibility, in their casual rhythms and diction, their bitter humour. Reading Ferlinghetti’s translations of *Paroles* and his own poetry side by side it’s easy at times to mistake one for the other, though the American is clearly the zanier of the two. I think Francis Ford Coppola is spot on in his characterization of Ferlinghetti’s poetry: “Lawrence gets you laughing and then hits you with the truth.” This mix of humour and seriousness pervades Ferlinghetti’s oeuvre. But if I have to choose a single poem above all the others it has to be “Underwear”;

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The 1971 we don’t talk about

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

According to estimations, around 200,000-400,000 women were tortured and raped by the Pakistani Military and their collaborators during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The numbers could be even higher. No one knows. In a country where patriarchal norms are still revered, many think that talking about the War heroines (Birangonas), or even being one, is shameful. Many think that their roles were not as significant as the freedom fighters.

Imagine living inside a bunker impenetrable by sunlight, crammed with 20-30 others, naked, or only with a little piece of cloth stuck to your body, sweating profusely in the hot season, shivering with the same intensity during winter when there’s not enough cover. Imagine not knowing what day and what month it is. It’s been so long. You haven’t witnessed generosity. Imagine a day lasting like a year, with no privacy of one’s own, the hellish tortures repeating frequently, as though they have become a ritual. For the captive women in 1971, life was very similar.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman clearly had something else in mind as he, with respect and honour, titled the violated women “Birangona.” The motive behind the naming had been simply to ignite a successful effort to recognize them as normal human beings who had actively taken part in the war as well, although differently. Despite the effort having a potential to heal and cure the wounds, the dehumanizing societal norms didn’t spare the Birangonas since they were women and as the norms dictated—impure. The people who worshipped those norms refused to give the Birangonas the dignity they deserved, negating the notion put forward by the nation’s father. Those people were the same ones who breathed the independent air and walked the independent soil. *The independent air and soil that came at the cost of the Birangonas’ sufferings.*

As if their (the Birangonas’) infernal trials in the concentration camps weren’t enough, they had many other battles to tend to post independence. Battles that rendered the achievement of independence (for them) petty. Battles that they had to engage in just for being the victims.

One of the narratives of the seven interviewees for the book, *Ami Birangona Bolchi*, could be easily found online, whose narrator is T. Nielsen (formerly known as Tara Banerjee), a Birangona. When I read the translated excerpt in *The*

Daily Star, I was satisfied with how her destiny had unfurled. At the same time, I was unhappy because not every story had ended similarly. The many Birangonas away from Dr Nilima Ibrahim’s book are now struggling to make their ends meet. Some are on the streets, some are earning less, as opposed to what they deserve. They could be any of the women who emerge with the traffic lights of Bangladesh’s cosmopolitan areas, having skin wrinkled by age,

represent the degree of sufferings and their aftermaths every Birangona had to face. It’s just a first person view into the lives of those the author could screen. In the face of history’s death and silence from many violated women’s ends, the fact that she could seize the seven stories and provide the readers a clear glimpse, is admirable.

The narratives are testaments to the fact that for a violated woman, her family wasn’t her best friend. Although

In the book, we see how one of the interviewees makes remarks about not having a single street throughout the country named as a tribute to their sacrifice while many portions of the country are thick with streets named after the male fighters and trailblazers. We see how women are not given saris to wear and forbidden to keep long hair in the military camps because they could commit suicide by tying themselves up inside. We see how inhumane and pred-



treading through the vacant spaces of the carnival of stationary cars, begging for money. They could be any of the grey haired women nestled between the legs of an over-bridge in Farmgate and Mogbazar, staring glassily at the independent city people pacing forward with their independent city lives. Although Dr Nilima Ibrahim’s book portrays chronicles that are tremendously cruel and inhumane, the compilation doesn’t

some were taken in by their families whole-heartedly, some weren’t. There is one such example where the husband refers to his wife (a Birangona) as a “witch” on her return, in front of their son. Besides, there’s one Hindu minor who doesn’t contact her family after independence because her family wouldn’t want her, given she had been violated at the hands of “Muslim” men. Such accounts are visible in most of the cases.

atory the military is—the animalistic rapes, the scant respite from the ritual. We see how the Pagri of one Indian soldier unspools to cover an undressed Birangona, the long, hot showers at the Dhanmondi Rehabilitation centre feels so calming after enduring a lengthy period of brutality, the first morsel of lovingly cooked lunch tastes with family. How satisfying acceptance is. How depressing estrangement is.



Dr Nilima Ibrahim deserves an ode for her work. Not only because of the compilation, but also for the journey that she had to undertake for setting these stories free, beyond the victims’ lips. Like managing successful adoptions (mostly encouraged by willing Canadian citizens), and triumphantly convincing many fleeing Birangonas (Pakistan bound) to stay since leaving would bring more uncertainty into their lives, the journey rendered her a godsend for the distressed women.

“Ami Birangona Bolchi” is an important document that shows that glory is not about selective admiration. It is a sanctuary for some war heroines’ stories. It is a little something that gives one the nudge to see how women are so vulnerable in war zones; their battles being of many kinds. It is an invisible hand that opens the Liberation war shaped window and invites the readers to look into its female victims and their various shades of distress. As inhabitants of an independent Bangladesh, we need to know about the war heroines, flaunt their contributions proudly, and do our best so that their history doesn’t die or get manipulated by time.

In the past few years there have been talks and efforts to rehabilitate the Birangonas. We have seen photos of old women living in shanties or in abject poverty. We have been assured through a few instances that show monetary help or a brick-built house for a Birangona. But have they been accepted by the society in general? I wonder if Bangladesh’s education curriculum will ever add stories like the ones here to the higher secondary Bangla books and bring the young learners closer to history and humanity. When will we be able to accept that rape is not a matter of shame or guilt for the woman or her family, but that it is a heinous act and a punishable crime committed by the perpetrators?

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