

How are you Tanguar Haor?

I am not fine, it has been a rough few months actually

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

The urgent scratch of a jackal and the whooshing sound of the brewing storm kept me awake for most parts of every night. I would be here for more than a week and as I slept or tried in vain to drift off into the night on the first of many nights, I wondered about my agenda for this trip. I mean, every trip has an agenda, right?

When Ibne Battuta sailed, it was for a pilgrimage; when Columbus did, he did it to find new lands; when an Instagram influencer travels, they do it for the likes. Agendas often get blurred but you end up chancing upon new lands and new adventures anyway. This particular journey to the land of water and rolling hills was something along those lines—where work merged with wistful walks on the banks of the haors, where my lucidity and sanity decided to perform an endless tango or sometimes put up solo dance numbers, where each dusk and dawn was so different from each other, it felt like I had lived a whole life in between.

The detachment from reality began with the journey to Tanguar itself. It took a broken bus coursing through the night, a rickety autorickshaw, a short walk and a long boat ride snaking through the Baulai river to finally get to Golabari. There, we would find a camp, set up in our anticipation on a strip of land, nestled conveniently between a strange oxbow river.

For the foreseeable next few days, I would be living out of a tent. And while the promise of a good adventure always got me riled up, this trip would somehow prove to be different. This was partly because it came at a time in my life when everything was in transition—everything I was familiar with was changing, but the changes were more internal than external. I went there to observe conservationists at work but, all the while, I was trying to escape my own work and responsibilities, to escape into and from myself. I kept hoping this journey would help me make up my mind, feel less fearful of a life on my own. I mean, if I could spend six hours inside a tent, with nothing

but my racing thoughts as company, surely, I could survive back in Dhaka on my own? Because nature is supposed to teach us that, right? To live in moments, to survive sunrise to sunsets?

I had romanticised travels for far too long to expect any different, thanks to all the travel books I had indulged in as a child.

I remember vividly, despite my foggy mind, that there was an intensity to seeing Tanguar Haor for the first time. It was the intensity of seeing something new, something that was not focused on my inner turmoil. The somewhat loopy days back in Dhaka had left me feeling blunt. Which must be why I sought the intensity of a newness, something that would convince me I could break a habit. This in part, because I believed what Pico Iyer said: "It is akin to the first kiss, the first date, all the firsts that have an intensity and life disproportionate to their duration; the first moment is worth a thousand others."

Tanguar Haor was new, enchanting and bewitchingly beautiful. Through the gnarly fingers of the Koroch trees, the ink-black sky poured into the ground. But it also invoked fear in me. The entire landscape was plunged into pitch black darkness by nightfall. Everything would fall silent, only the lone jackal called, the jungle cats howled in unison for a partner and the north wind kept on billowing. As I adjusted my eyes to the darkness, I would be treated to the magic of the haor, flooded under the half-baked moon.

For miles, as far as my eyes could see, the grass fields went on and on until a break in the land introduced a narrow river. In the cold of the night, the river appeared as though full of black, inky liquid, only slightly disturbed by the breeze.

And in the eerie quiet of those nights, I would make my way into my blue tent to settle down for the night. A whole day of rowing out into the wild, counting birds, eating picnic lunches on soft grass, taking showers in the stark clear water of the river, would somehow still tire me more, rather than replenish my

spirits. Rather than give me answers, the wild left me more bewildered. I had just been put on anti-depressants back in the city and now, here, in the wilderness, I searched frantically for my missing medicines. But in vain. As my mind crumbled, so did my perception of how I viewed nature. It appeared more and more out of control. The gnarly fingers of the trees appeared to me as though they were wailing for help, their branches sighing in exasperated despair.

Nights would go by like this. Each night would be another battlefield inside the zigzag neuron network of my mind, as an early February storm thrashed the flimsy walls of my tent. On the nights the storm was the strongest and loudest, so too were my thoughts. The thoughts raced with the wind, thinking of how my relationship was nearing its end, how helpless the end would feel, how confused I still was. There was one night, when the north wind blew the hardest, and a soaking wet jungle cat meowed in broken peals for some shelter. Inside, I tossed and turned; and through the somewhat opaque tent window I looked out into the haor—the vast, green emptiness—and saw the moon wash over it. On the good nights in the wild, I would find myself drifting off to sleep very quickly and easily. Much like how the orange leaves rustled and fell off, brushing against the plastic skin of my tent. On those days, the haor was mostly quiet, minus the occasional breeze and the hoot of a barn owl, breaking the silence of the night. In the especially silent nights, my mind would also whir a little less. It slowed to match the breeze, calm for a while until worries of career plans, passions versus pragmatism made sudden uninvited appearances.

The haor synced its routine with mine. We both woke up around the same time, though sometimes I would run a little late. Most mornings I sat and watched the sun break out on the plains ahead of me, reflect off of the blue water and make my eyes squint at the sudden brightness. These particularly sunny

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PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED



Snake creek in the Sundarbans, Bangladesh

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"Our boat is trying to break into the rain wall of Sundarbans. With a little nudge from the boatman, it punctures the rain wall of the creek and plunges into the secret garden of snakes. Soaked to our bones, we keep rowing and rowing, brushing off drooping Kewra branches, looking out for creepy crawlies. We are inside snake territory. The static of the rain is cut by sounds of camouflaged Green Pit Vipers almost falling into the small boat. The snake creek goes on for miles and it feels like we are stuck in an endless Amazonian experience, ducking snakes, monitor lizards, wiping off rain from our eyes, trying to find light."

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