

POETRY

Politicking with Pain

AKA. BHINNO

I can't sleep anymore
Piano. Storms. White noise
Nothing works.

I can't fly stars in the skies
Or drag the dark to my bed
Instead I fold my defeat,
Roll it under my bed
While the nocturnal hyenas
Wait to pull my lashes out, one by one

Yet...
their COVID conversations
About the unusual length of their beards continue
Simultaneously covering their car seats, fans, ceilings, yawns and stretches

Yet...
Their rhetorics remain
Painfully poised
Arduously Aligned
With discourses dabbling
On winning the next power lottery.

They taunt, tease and turn
Every strategy to own Forever
Living on...
To dictate, roost, and roll
In garlands of indignities...

While...
My crushed bones appeal
Against my demolition in the junkyard of pain
Remotely negotiating a return to life



While...
I
fly kites
Only to return to a ditch
Etched with a tombstone
Of Torture Tales

While...
I
remain buried alive
wrapped in layers of white
With unexplained, defeated
Ink blotches
Of my womanly surrender...

Go ahead.
Pull the plug.
I don't need my breath anymore.

FICTION

For a Pinch of Life

ABDULLAH RAYHAN

A damp siren screamed at the rushing wind. Black and thick smoky clouds slowly clotted in a grey sky, as if preparing for some kind of a ritual. The siren blared again. The tilting waves splashed against the faded yellow ferry that was once sunny yellow. Rusty parts of the ferry's body were exposed to the mighty waves of the Karnaphuli River.

When was the last time he talked to his father? Selim tried to remember. It was more than ten hours ago. His father was not picking up the phone. Terrible thoughts flitted through his mind. Maybe his father could not pick up the phone because he was sobbing beside his recently deceased wife. The lack of insulin failed to hold on to a life that had been struggling to escape for a long time.

Selim knew he should not allow such thoughts cross his mind. Maybe his father was running from one pharmacy to the next. But what his naïve father was doing was a wasted effort. Selim would not have crossed hundreds of miles to go the city if there was insulin near their village.

Selim had a really hard time. It was like an invisible hand choking his throat and with each passing hour, the grip was getting stronger.

A melancholic journey it was for Selim. Melancholic not for the toil but for the miserable start of an important journey. He took his seat on the second to last row of a rickety bus. And right after ten minutes through their journey, a woman who sat beside Selim threw up, and that too, right on his lap.

How could one scream at someone who was sick? Selim could not. Then he had to use all the water he was carrying to remove the traces of vomit from his only good shirt.

He could not get rid of the stench though. He also could not drink water throughout the whole journey.

The bus took Selim to the only train station in the division. He had reached the station only a minute before the train left. Somehow, he managed to squeeze his one foot inside the train but could not buy a ticket. When TT came to check tickets, he tried to hide in the toilet. But the ticket checkers are used to this kind of tricks. They pulled Selim out of the toilet and threatened to throw him out of the moving train if he didn't pay the fine.



The amount in Selim's pocket continued to dwindle.

He had to walk a quite a bit till he reached the area where the pharmacies were supposed to be. Maybe he was misguided, or maybe didn't understand where they were located.

After following the instructions some other pedestrians, he arrived at a fish market where yet there was no pharmacy.

Then he saw the man. He was perhaps in his mid-fifties. His well-parted silver hair glowed with an aura of wisdom. In a melodiously pious voice he asked Selim if he needed any help.

Selim felt somewhat relieved. He told him of his problem. The man promised to help him.

The man walked with Selim.

Selim walked beside the man.

Selim found himself in a narrow lane of the city.

A dark lane with a broken lamppost that huddled to the ground. A dog slept on the sidewalk and a small pocket knife was held against Selim's throat.

Selim was forced to give away the money he had with him.

But then out of desperation he requested the man to give him some of his own money so that he could buy his mother's insulin and return home.

The man proved to be kind. He allowed Selim to have the amount he needed and kept the rest.

Selim found a pharmacy after walking for a few minutes. He bought the insulin, and then rushed off to the station, but the train had already left.

The man at the ticket counter suggested that he take the ferry. He went to the ferry station by bus. He had to keep standing the whole way. It cost him the amount he had saved for his meal.

He felt dizzy. Dark shadows filtered his consciousness. His eyes were dry even though he wanted to howl like a madman.

Once again, he pulled out his phone. The first drop of a heavy rain fell on the cracked screen. He saw his phone was about to go out. He might be able to make only one phone call.

He wanted to know how his mother was doing. He wanted her to know that he was coming home with the insulin. He wanted to assure his mother that she would be all right and that she would recover really soon. She would once again be able to breathe normally.

But his father did not pick up the phone. Maybe he was still going from one pharmacy to another in search of the medicine. That man really did love his wife.

Selim ran amid the rain and thunder and gushes of wind. He fell and stumbled in the slippery mud but protected the insulin though by now he was quite certain the insulin would not be needed anymore.

As he neared the house, he noticed the people.

A lot of people were there. Men-women, boys and girls of different ages. Most of the elders were crying. Including Selim's mother.

His father was dead.

He was near the town in search of medicine when a truck hit him as he was about to cross the road. He did not notice the speeding truck because he was looking at his phone. His son had called.

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Diary of Pandemic Days

MOHAMMAD SHAMSUZZAMAN

It's already been several months since we've been hurled into the vortex of the coronavirus. The virus lives among us, silent and invisible. We continue to slip further into the uncertainty of the pandemic. Locked down, our life shrinks and flips. Our sweet homes no longer feel sweet. They feel like asylums. The difference between Fridays and Sundays as well as the difference between days and nights blurs. We are isolated both from friends and foes. The deadly virus wants to re-define our life in every conceivable way. We worry about our jobs, our health and our security. We wonder whether a peaceful, graceful, and fulfilling life will be possible. While I witness tragedies unfolding around me, I feel affected and afflicted. I seem to have developed a pandemic personality, which borders on being a disorder. To gain some control over this seemingly uncontrollable situation, I started three months ago to write to discover hope and healing. These posts below are not factual details of events but reflections provoked by the pandemic.

March 23, 2020
I grew up in Dhaka loving it with an absolute passion. But the Dhaka that I grew up in and the Dhaka it has become—and is becoming—is quite different. It looks abandoned and spooky. Life here is reduced to mere breathing. Where has my city of charming chaos gone? I love its toxic pollution, its impulsive honking, its choking traffic, and its maddening crowds. Dhaka has lost the essential vices I used to love it for. I no longer can stand it. But I can't leave it, either. Bigger off, you stupid virus!

As elsewhere in the world, we're faced with an existential threat here in Dhaka because of the coronavirus. Life is severely compromised. Schools are closed; flights are cancelled; movements are restricted; isolation and quarantine have started to define our civic discourse; victims and death counts are on the rise. Everyone looks panicked and perplexed. Worse seems looming. Everyone believes the prophets who predict perdition. I'm hoping against hope that the situation improves here and everywhere. Hugs to you all. I'm still me, and my tag line remains, "Life's beautiful."

March 24, 2020
We're advised to stay home because of the coronavirus, and I do. My voyeuristic impulse, however, dragged me down to the streets this morning around 9:00 A.M. I sighed. Dhaka is changed beyond recognition. It is one of the busiest cities in the world, and the Bashundhara Residential Area, where we live, is even busier. This small place has several big schools, hospitals, banks, and corporate offices. Life unfolds here early in the morning every day, and until mid-night people are always

on the streets and on their toes. The place never sleeps. But today I find it desolate. The atmosphere is eerie. The virus threatens miseries, and we don't know how long those miseries will continue. All I know is that we need to be ourselves again—humane, social, and free—sooner rather than later. The horror is already consuming, but it seems to be the beginning of a long horror story ahead. Wherever you are and whoever you are, always believe that life is beautiful. Hugs!
March 31, 2020
We still have to love our neighbors from afar. We no longer can hug them. We can't shake hands with them, either. Proximity is deadly. Our social relationship is no longer defined by trust. Our neighbors are no longer the neighbors we used to



know and mingle with. They have become potential virus transmitters. We must not meet and greet them. This is a powerful background for a horror movie. And the remainder of the movie may be even more horrifying. We're living a horror movie-life here and everywhere around the globe. Race, religion, and geographical boundaries have already dissolved in panic and uncertainty. We're crying and dying. We have not stopped worrying about our neighbors. We're getting diminished by every death anywhere in the world. But our empathy expands. If someone calls the coronavirus an empathy virus, is he crazy?

April 02, 2020
Rain usually ruins my mood. Today, it didn't. It rained here today. Gustly wind blew. Hail fell. All these quirks of nature turned a musty, murky day into a calming night. It feels blissful. My apprehension is replaced with optimism. My instinct tells me that the rain washed away the virus; that the wind blew it away; and that the hail buried it. Perhaps now we can live, laugh, and love as usual. Life beckons us. Brace up. This pandemic is a love test. Stand out and stand by. We'll overcome. This is a tough time, but tough times don't stay. Tough people do. We have done it in the past. We'll do it this time around,

too. Hugs!
April 05, 2020
We're locked down, but our minds aren't. They roam around. They tell us that the usual hum of public life is missing. The rituals of our life are reversed. We don't pound the pavement as we used to do. We don't get on and off public transports with abandon. We don't hop on and off planes for far-off destinations. We no longer anticipate lunch or dinner with friends at restaurants. The virus has cloistered people indoors around the world. Eerie silence prevails. That spews fear and uncertainty. We apprehend more deaths, more crumpled economies, and more agonies. The future doesn't entice us. The past beckons us. We become nostalgic. And in the first week of April, we're nostalgic about the last

week of March, when life was not so different and difficult in some parts of the world. Nostalgia surprisingly has become an effective emotional weapon to fight against this pandemic. Soak in it a little. Life was beautiful, and life will be beautiful again.

April 10, 2020
The light of the day still lingers here in Dhaka as the night descends. No one rushes to reach home—everyone is already home. We're on the third week of the closure. Amid new cases and clusters of the coronavirus, our government extends the closure till the 25th of April. The prognosis is that the situation will turn worse before it turns better. We can't quite fathom that reality. The virus already has fractured our fortune. Our optimism has started to ebb. We're becoming emotionally vulnerable, physically clumsy, and rationally wacky. We desperately want to renew our regular routines and rituals of life. We need what humans want: movement, communication, and interaction. Alas!

Hang in there, my fellow fighters. We've weathered viruses, bacteria, and beasts (human as well as animal) in the past. We'll come away from this crisis more compassionate, more united, and stronger. Stay home. Stay hopeful.
May 13, 2020

The night is about to descend here in Dhaka. This lag between a day and a night, however, seems a little confusing. It's not night yet, but it is. It rained here, and it's still raining. The sun is covered with heavy clouds. It's already dark around and is becoming darker. It feels like a twilight around, but no one seems to romanticize it. The virus still whips through us. We continue to slip further into panic and uncertainty. Surprisingly, the air around feels so soothing. Breathe it. Forget about the pandemic. And remember that just six weeks back, our life was delightfully different. That life still beckons us. Wait! Stay home. Stay safe.

May 19, 2020
If you feel lonely and abandoned, please remember that you're not alone. If anxiety and apprehension overcome you, there's nothing pathological about you. All of us are acting and reacting almost alike around the globe. For about two months, we've not been able to do what we were used to doing. We're living like zombies. The rituals of our life flipped. The priorities of our life shifted. Our public engagements almost nixed. We're herded into a big, empty bubble of virus. And we continue to wallow in woes. The virus continues to infect and kill. We mourn. Our confidence plunges. Our optimism dwindles. Helpless as we are, some of us may have developed pandemic personality disorder. Relax, please. Our collective intelligence and optimism are too formidable for the virus to sap. We'll live again, soon. Stay hopeful.

Code
Given my space-constraints, I only cherry-picked some the entries that I posted on Facebook since the last week of March, when our government imposed countrywide closure. The virus is still wild and unforgiving across the country. Infections and death tolls surge. Nonetheless, our government decides to lift the closure following the 30th of May. Countries around the globe are also easing or lifting lockdown. That's understandable. The WHO warns that the virus is not going to go some time soon, or we might have to live with it permanently as we do with the HIV virus. The corona virus has pitted the economy against safety. And after two months of closure, we've discovered that economy is safety. If we stay home and don't work, we'll die. If we go out and work, the virus might kill us. Humans are mortal, anyway. Did we need a pandemic to remind us something so bland and basic?

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