



Editor's note

Many words are written every year in remembrance of the spirit of '71. For all our essays, reports and opinion pieces on the legacy of the Liberation War, a certain texture of the history is nevertheless lost amidst the grand political narratives being crafted. At the end of the day, the war manifested in, and left its strongest mark through, emotions, memories, traumas. And capturing the essence of such in between spaces is a job best done by poetry and music. Perhaps no other form so poignantly records the spirit of rebellion and solidarity that rose up in 1971.

Keeping this in mind, we devote this year's Independence Day special supplement to the poetry that came out of the Bangladesh Liberation War. Some of the poems included here were written during and in the short aftermath of the war; others have been penned by contemporary authors who have had to reckon with its legacy through their ancestors. In presenting some of these verses in translation, we seek to reflect yet another aspect of how these poems—and their emotions—endure 52 years since Bangladesh's independence.

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'FOR YOUR SAKE, O FREEDOM' 1971 and Bangladeshi poetry

Bangla was recognised as one of the national languages of Pakistan, but there were other sources of discontent. Democracy had been put on hold, and the economic exploitation of East Pakistan continued apace. A pro-democracy movement gathered momentum in the late 1960s, inspiring a spate of political poetry.

KAISER HAQ

Bangladeshi poetry has always been sensitive to socio-political issues and public themes. In discussing the poetic response to the Liberation War, therefore, it is useful to start with the broad historical background, move on to the literary tradition, and then consider the poetry itself.

The immediate historical background is the movement for provincial autonomy, out of which came the independence struggle. Further back is the Language Movement, which exposed a fissure in the national ethos of Pakistan. Ironically, Bangalee Muslims had been among the most ardent supporters of the Pakistan movement. Their disillusionment, when it came, was understandably all the more intense and bitter.

A deeper historical root of Bangladesh lies in the short-lived Bengal partition of 1905; for six years it put on the map the province of East Bengal and Assam, with Dhaka as its capital. Though opposed by the Hindus, the partition was welcomed by a majority of the region's Muslims. One may also partially identify an antecedent of Bangladesh in the abortive move in 1947 by an alliance of Hindu and Muslim leaders—including Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, Abul Hashem, Sarat Chandra Bose, and Kiran Shankar Roy—to have an independent "Free State of Bengal".

There is another, much older, historical circumstance that has a bearing on the Bangladesh movement.

In the Sepoy Uprising of 1857, the rebels belonged to the Bengal Army, recruited mainly from the Gangetic plains, while the Gurkha, Sikh, Punjabi Muslim, Jat, Dogra, and Pathan soldiers remained loyal to the British. After the rebellion was quelled, the British propounded the theory of martial and non-martial races, placing under the former category all the ethnic groups that had been loyal to them. Henceforth their Indian soldiers were recruited from among them, while the old catchment area of the Gangetic plain was deemed



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

to be peopled by non-martial types. The martial races were supposed to be good fighters, loyal and obedient, albeit a bit obtuse; and the non-martial ones clever but feckless and duplicitous.

Such racial stereotyping survived as an unfortunate legacy of the Raj, and poisoned relations between West Pakistanis and the Bangalees of East Bengal. The "martial" Punjabi took it as his right to dominate the "non-martial" Bangalee. When the Pakistan Army launched its genocidal onslaught, little did it expect an effective popular resistance. The Bangalee freedom fighters not only helped liberate their country but also removed the mind-forged manacles of racial stereotypes. Bangladeshis could henceforth project

a self-image free of an inferiority complex.

With the partition of 1947, Dhaka emerged as a significant literary-cultural hub. There were a few traditionalist poets imbued with the Islamic ideology of the Pakistan movement, but they were quickly put in the shade by a new generation of modernists whose distinctive characteristic was a capacity for aestheticist introspection that coexisted with a lively interest in public events. The killing of five Language Movement demonstrators on February 21, 1952 elicited an immediate response from them. The tragic event has ever since exercised the imagination of our poets, inspiring protest poetry as well

as meditative verse.

Bangla was recognised as one of the national languages of Pakistan, but there were other sources of discontent. Democracy had been put on hold, and the economic exploitation of East Pakistan continued apace. A pro-democracy movement gathered momentum in the late 1960s, inspiring a spate of political poetry.

Shamsur Rahman, the country's leading modern poet, climbed down from the ivory tower to write poems like "Hartal", "Asader Shirt" (the eponymous Asad being a martyr of the pro-democracy agitation), "Safed Panjabi" ("White Kurta", a lively portrait of Bhasani, whom *Time* magazine, if I remember rightly, had dubbed the "red maulana"). A younger poet, Nirmalendu Goon, wrote the highly popular "Hulia" ("Arrest Warrant").

The struggle for democracy and, for some, for socialism, and the poetry that emerged from it, had international analogues: protests against the Vietnam War, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, student uprisings, notably in Paris in May 1968, all of which had literary repercussions. Protest poets like Adrian Mitchell and Christopher Logue and the Beats enjoyed worldwide readership; poets in Bangladesh could rightly feel they were

part of a global trend.

Then came the crackdown of March 25, 1971, plunging 70 million people into a cauldron of terror, panic, anxiety, but also strengthening a collective resolve to resist and overcome. Such powerful emotions had to result in a large body of poetry.

But there was a catch. The ruthlessness of the military crackdown, and the spread throughout the land of armed conflict between freedom fighters and occupation forces, meant the suspension of many normal activities. The creative imagination was constricted by anxiety. And even if it found expression somehow, the process of cultural production was blocked. Liberation War poetry consequently saw the light of print after victory was achieved.

The most magisterial poetic take on the independence war is undoubtedly Shamsur Rahman's collection "Bondi Shibir Theke" ("From the Concentration Camp"). Rahman himself has given us the backstory in a moving preface to the definitive edition of the book (Dhaka, 1997). After the crackdown, he and his family moved out of Dhaka city and sought refuge in his ancestral village in Narsingdi for a month and a half. He wrote two of his best-known poems there: "Tomake Pavar Jonyo, hey Swadhinata" ("For Your Sake, O Freedom") and "Swadhinata Tumi" ("Freedom, You Are"). He started writing poems in a diary, and secreted it in all sorts of odd places, just in case men in uniform came and conducted a search. Only his wife, a few close friends and a few freedom fighters knew of this. Returning to his house in Dhaka in mid-May, Rahman found the yard overgrown with grass and weeds, and an insouciant white cat that had made its home there; the animal's composure gave much needed reassurance amidst the tension and terror, the daily arrests and murders, the ominous noises of military vehicles, and the sound of boots. Going to work, reading, writing, all seemed meaningless.

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One was an exile in one’s own home. Under such dire conditions, Rahman composed the 38 poems of his book.

The manuscript was smuggled through Mukti Bahini channels to Kolkata, where the critic Abu Sayeed Ayub published some of the poems in *Desh*. For obvious security reasons Ayub chose a nom de plume for the poet:

Majlum Adib, which, significantly, means “persecuted writer”. After Bangladesh achieved independence, the first edition of *Bondi Shibir Theke*, comprising a selection of the poems, was published in Kolkata in 1972. The definitive edition later published in Bangladesh gives a richer and more varied picture of wartime Bangladesh, and repays careful study.

Several poems depict the desperate situation of those who were stuck in a city under occupation. “*Pather Kukur*” (“Stray Dog”), for instance, contrasts the anxiety-ridden people in a house who sit in “funereal silence” with the carefree stray dog that roams outside and charges after an army Jeep. The speaker can only wish he “were at least that stray dog”. There is a realistic account of the harassment people faced in the streets alongside a satirical portrait of Yahya Khan (“*Pratyahik*”: “Quotidian”); an elegiac description of a shell-shattered house (“*Ekhane Dorja Chhilo*”: “I Remember”, in my translation); and in a laudable exercise in empathy, a monologue of a fatally wounded Pakistani soldier who realises that he has been used as an instrument of tyranny (“*Jonoiko Pathan Shoinik*”: “A Pathan Soldier”).

While Shamsur Rahman was the most prolific of our major poets, his younger contemporary Shaheed Quaderi was the opposite. Still, his small but distinguished output includes five memorable poems relating to the war. In “*Kobita, Akshyam Astra Amar*” (“Poetry, My Useless Weapon”) he desperately exhorts his lines to “roar at least once like field guns”. “*Nishidhyo Journal Theke*” (“From a Forbidden Journal”) depicts a devastated Dhaka city and a martyred boy, yet ends on an affirmative note. “*Pakhira Signal Dai*” (“Signalling Birds”, in my translation) celebrates the freedom of the birds with “ID-less wings” as they soar above the occupied city. “*Blackouter Purnimai*” (“Blackout on a Full Moon”) looks forward to the return of those who have become refugees. “*Swadhinatar Shahar*” (“The City after Liberation”) presents a perceptive and melancholy picture of the ambiguous gifts brought by independence.

Muktijuddher Kabita (“Poems of the Liberation War”), edited by the late lamented litterateur Abul Hasanat, showcases 270 poems by 126 poets. It gives a fair impression of our Liberation War poetry, its recurrent themes and tropes, its tonal range, its prosodic predilections. The poets range from Jasimuddin, then the doyen of Bangladeshi poets, to those who were young only the other day. The veteran pastoral poet’s robust rhymed couplets in the poem “*Muktijoddha*” (“Freedom Fighter”) is a stirring and confident monologue that convincingly overturns the myth of the non-martial Bangalee. So do numerous poems in this anthology; collectively they become a chorus of heroic national self-affirmation.

The reader will find many such poems; here are a few more that arrested my attention: Ahsan Habib’s “Search”, Syed Shamsul Haque’s clever pattern poems, “Guerilla” and “Bostur Akar” (“The Shape of Things”), Fazal Shahabuddin’s “*Muktijoddhake*” (“To a Freedom Fighter”), Manzur-e-Mowla’s “Hey Bir” (“O Hero”), Khondkar Ashraf Hussein’s “Bowski Bridge”.

Faruk Alamgir’s “*Modhynanney Muktijoddhake*” (“To a Freedom Fighter at MIDDAY”) adds a realistic twist by ending on the note of disillusionment that overtook many freedom fighters after independence. Unsurprisingly, several poems invoke the leader of the independence struggle, for instance, Belal Chowdhury’s “*Abohoman Bangla o Bangalir*” (“Of Eternal Bengal and Bangalees”), which ends by mentioning “An imperishable red waterlily/ Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman”; his historic speech of March 7, 1971 is given effective mythopoeic treatment in Nirmalendu Goon’s “*Swadhinata ei shobdota amader ki bhabe holo*” (“How we gained possession of the word freedom”).

What about English language poetry and the war? Mention must be made of Razia Khan’s title poem of her first collection, “Argus under Anaesthesia” and “God in the Goblet”, from the same collection. The first is a heartfelt response to the crackdown, the second to the massacre of intellectuals. I have published three poems about the war, “Crackdown” and “Bangladesh 1971”, written just after independence, and a third looking back on that fateful year. I wish I had written more. I will conclude with a salute to Allen Ginsberg, whose “September on Jessor Road” remains unmatched as an evocation of the desolation of the refugee trail.

I do not know if there have been any critical studies of the poetry of our independence war. It would be a worthwhile subject for a PhD; I hope young researchers will take note.

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You said

Shamsur Rahman

(Translated by Fakrul Alam)

Notun Bazar was burning, burning!
Shops, stores, woodpiles
Piled up iron, timber, mosques and temples
Notun Bazar was burning, burning!

Parrot cages, copies of Rabindranath’s collected works, sweet-meat shops
Maps old documents all aflame
Just as bees swarm out of hives buzzing,
Flushed out with smoke from a fire
All of us flushed out by flames
All of us swarming and fleeing the city like bees
Scattering here, there, everywhere
Hugging her newly-born babe in her bosom a bewildered mother
Fleeing like a singed forest deer
In the distance bullets whizzing past, ransacking army jeeps hogging roads.
Shrieks
And screams filling streets. The two of us

Stunned into silence. Trembling, we embracing each other somehow.
You saying:
“Save me, save from this fire lit by barbarians
Hide me in the fold of your eyes
In the depth of your heart or within your ribcage
Suck me in an instant
In kiss after kiss.”

Notun Bazar was burning, burning
Flames here there everywhere
Lead bullets zinging past us like hail
You had said
“Save me!”
But hapless me not able to say even that openly!

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ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED



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A fugitive

Nirmalendu Goon
(Translated by Rifat Munim)

It was noontime when I arrived home
the sun was shining bright,
my shadow, spinning on and on, is reduced
to a thin line.
No one could recognise me.
When lighting a cigarette on the train
I borrowed a match from someone
when boarding a train at the Mahkuma station
someone wanted to pull me into an embrace,
or when someone screamed his surprise
placing his hand on my shoulder,
I reminded everyone of resemblance between people
even when they are not related.
No one could recognise me. Sitting in front of me,
a political leader, who was a communist, kept glancing at my face; yet he too couldn't.
As soon as I alighted at Barahatta I had tea at Rafiz's stall;
I was truly surprised to see Rafiz did not recognise me
even when adding some extra sugar to my tea.
After five long years I was returning to my unaltered village;
down the same dilapidated road, down the same thin strip of dark soil
marking land boundaries

I was returning to my village after so long!
It was noontime when I arrived in my village
the sun was shining bright
the wind was whizzing by.
The house had changed a lot—
from corrugated iron sheets to pond water
from the flower garden to the cow pen
no trace of my childhood memory was to be found anywhere.
From atop a bel flower tree bending over
the veranda of the reading room
a laudoga snake flicked out its tongue to the sweltering noon.
Like stubble that grows spontaneously on a face
grass, undergrowth, pits, thickly grown forest of plants and trees
engulfed the house from all sides,
as if, mocking the civilisational foundation everywhere,
obstinate nature was ruling the roost here.
A fox was lying too close to a dog;
upon seeing me there,
one of them fled right away while another began
sniffing out a familiar smell perhaps, just like a checker along with
a cop tried to sniff out my identity at Tejgaon.

I was walking till I was rendered motionless by the sight of a tree:
An ashok tree, which was damaged in the 1962 storm—
the cool shade it provided once could effortlessly hide two people!
In the name of love, we once buried ourselves into the night
under its shade.

Her name was Bashonti, ah Bashonti!
She lived in Bihar now and bore her robber-husband four children.
The water in the pond rippled as a fish slapped the water with its tail
while a snake flashed its tongue again;
rattling the calm, placid, foolish village
an airplane flew westward
while I, knocking loudly on the door from the rear side of the house,
called: Ma.

The door which didn't open in a long time
the door which didn't hear any voice in a long time
that rusted door creaked open in the blink of an eye.

I had evaded arrest all this time; the detective branch
had failed to put me behind bars;
but under a sweltering sun in the month of Chaitra
with strong wind whizzing by



how easily I found myself imprisoned in my mother's embrace;
how easily I, that same person, became a child once again
upon looking at my mother's eyes.

Hiding me locked in a teary kiss,
crossing long stretches of feisty undergrowth,
Mother reached the pond to wash rice.
I took a look around and saw:
in the middle of two rooms
the image of Ganes— the god of salvation and wisdom—
was replaced by Lenin; beside Father's ledger was Karl Marx
while a gap revealed by a broken portion of the almirah mirror
was bridged by a frazzled image of Krupskaya.¹

Ma was walking back from the pond, Father would return
in the evening from the district town—a bag containing provisions
would be slung over his shoulder as usual.
Hearing about my arrival, Sister-in-law would come to visit soon;
she'd implore me again to get married.
Hearing about my arrival,
from Jashmadhob would come NAP leader Yasin.
Walking three miles from Rasulpur would come Aditya,
in the dead of night Abbas would turn up from Amtala,
carrying his deadly firearm.

All of them would ask about the situation in Dhaka:
What lies ahead of us?
Where is Ayub Khan now?
Is Sheikh Mujib making a mistake?
How long will the arrest warrant hang over my head?

I'd say nothing in reply; as they stared at me
I'd just gaze back into their eyes and observe in the lines of their faces
the different futures lying ahead of us.

Darkness would descend on their anxious faces
while I, removing the pain of incapacitated desire with a scream,
would say:
"I don't know anything about these,
I don't understand any of this."

Rifat Munim is an editor, journalist, bilingual writer, translator and essayist.

¹ Legendary Marxist political leader who worked closely with Lenin, and later with Stalin and Trotsky.

Smell of corpse in the air

Rudro Mohammad Shahidullah
(Translated by Rifat Munim)

I smell corpses rotting in the air to this day
I observe death's naked dance on the soil to this day,
I hear the hapless scream of the raped in my sleep to this day—
Has this country forgotten the night of horror, that bloodied time?
In the air floats smell of corpse
With blood is smeared the soil.
Those who once touched the brow of this land with a chest full of
hopes
Have sought out forbidden corners in the pus of their tattered lives.
In love with a lightless cage, they stay awake in dark caves today.
As if it was a virgin mother, benumbed after her wretched birth,
Independence—is it then a wretched birth?
Is it then the shame harvested by that fatherless mother?
That old vulture has clawed at the nation's flag again.
In the air floats smell of corpse—
Still the curvaceous woman stirs up a deluge of flesh dancing in
neon light.
Smeared is the soil with blood—
Still bones of starving people pile up in rice warehouses.
I can't sleep a wink. I can't sleep a wink all night—
All I hear in my sleep is the hapless scream of the raped
On the river water float rotten corpses like water-hyacinth
The headless torso of a girl, eaten away by dogs,
Stings my eyes—I can't sleep,
I can't sleep ...
Wrapped up in a bloodied shroud—eaten away by dogs, eaten away
by vultures,
He is my brother,
She is my sister,
He is my beloved father.
Independence—they are the only dear ones left, after I lost
everything to the war,
Independence—they are the priceless crops I harvested with the
blood of my loved ones.
Sari of my raped sister—that today is my nation's bloodied flag.



ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

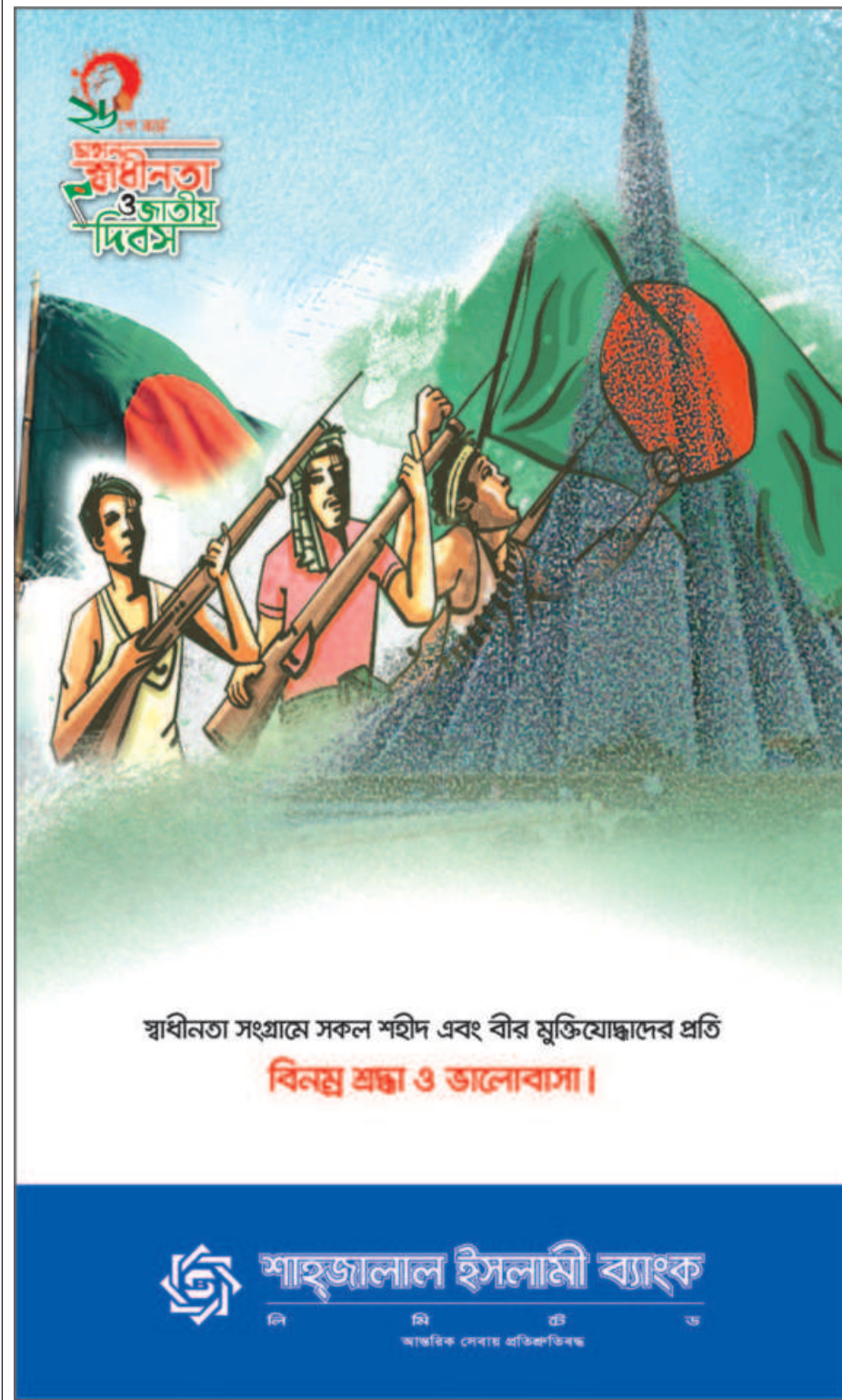
Poetry, my useless weapon

Shaheed Quaderi
(Translated by Kaiser Haq)

As bird flocks take wing at the rattle of Sten guns
the broken-winged poems crouching in my notebook
bury their faces in a dark drawer
and lie like dead swans—or is it like
an ancient rusty good-for-nothing pistol
without a bullet in its chamber? Still,
I can't get over my attachment. The day
our neighborhood, swept by searchlights,
trembled at the drilled terror
of barking voices and heavy alien boots,
this house too shook in fear
though I hadn't any hidden weapons
to give me away. But I, nervous, cowardly
though I am, boldly shielded you from shiny bayonets
and kept you safe from bonfires.
Just as a guerrilla fighting for freedom
straps a Sten gun to his thigh
or warily advances, grenade in hand,
I have evaded prying eyes to keep you concealed
as if you bore the promise of a deadly explosion.
One day, I remember, I dug a hole in the garden
and tenderly laid you down. But when
the heavy boots of foreigners trod all over you
heedlessly as they came to pound on the door
you didn't explode like a defensive mine.

O my serried words, if you still doze in silence
like bedraggled crows on my notebook pages
is it for nothing that I've put up with contumely
in my vaunted lifelong passion for you?
You are nothing but restless insomniac nights,
you've given me neither royal diadem nor
commoner's covenant—
why do I still abase myself at your feet?
Come, let us shake hands and part company,
only let me plead one last time:
If you can
at least once
roar like a field-gun.

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1971

Tarfia Faizullah

i.

In west Texas, oil froths
luxurious from hard ground
while across Bangladesh,

bayoneted women stain
pond water blossom. Your
mother, age eight, follows

your grandmother down worn
stone steps to the old pond,
waits breathless for her

to finish untwining from
herself the simple cotton
sari to wade alone into green

water—the same color,
your mother thinks, as
a dress she'd like to twirl

the world in. She knows
the strange men joining
them daily for meals mean

her no harm—they look like
her brothers do nights they
jump back over the iron gate,

drenched in the scents of else-
where—only thinner. So thin—
in the distance, thunder,

though the sky reflected
in the water her mother
floats in burns bright blue.

ii.

Gather these materials:

slivers of wet soap, hair

swirling pond water, black oil.

Amar peet ta duye de na,

Grandmother says, so Mother

palms the pink soap, slides

it between her small hands

before arcing its jasmine-

scented froth across her

back. Gather these materials:

the afternoon's undrowned

ceremonies, the nattering

of cicadas—yes, yes, yes—

Mother watches Grandmother

disappear into water: light:

many-leafed, like bits of bomb-

shells gleaming like rose petals

upturned in wet grass, like

the long river in red twilight—

iii.

1971: the entire world unraveling
like thread your mother pulls

and pulls away from the hem of her
dress. In America, the bodies

of men and women march forward
in protest, rage candling

their voices—in Vietnam, monks
light themselves on fire, learning

too late how easily the body burns—
soon, the men whose stomachs

flinch inward will struggle
the curved blades of their bayonets

into khaki-clad bodies, but for now
they lean against the cool stone

walls of your grandparents' house,
eyes closed as your mother watches

her mother twirl in the pond, longs
to encircle herself in ripples

of light her fingers might
arpeggio across green water—

she loves the small diamond
in her mother's nose, its sunlit

surface glittering like curled
hot metal she knows falls from

the sky, though never before her eyes.

iv.

Why call any of it back? Easy

enough to descend with your

mother, down

and down hard
stone steps—how I loved,

she says, to watch her—

yes, reach

forward to touch

the sun-ambered softness

of the bright sari Grandmother

retwines around
her body—yes,

your eyes
dazzled by the diamond's

many-chambered light
—it shined

so, Mother says,
though it's not you

she's speaking to anymore,

caught as she is in this reeling

backward—1971
and a Bangladeshi

woman catches the gaze

of a Pakistani
soldier through rain-curved palm

trees—her sari is torn
from her—

*She bathed the same
way each time,* Mother says

—the torn woman curls
into green silence—*first, she*

*would fold her sari,
then dive in—yes,*

the earth green
with rain, the water,

green—*then she would
wash her face
until her nose pin shined, aha re,
how it shined—*

his eyes, green

—*then she would ask me to wash her back—*

the torn woman a helix of blood

—*then she would rub cream into her
beautiful skin—*

the soldier buttoning
himself back
into khaki—yes, call it
back again—

v.

Two oceans between you, but still
you can see her running a finger
along the granite counter in the sun-

spilled kitchen, waiting for the tea
to boil before she drives past old
west Texas oil fields still bright

with bluebells. But tell me, she asks,
*why couldn't you research the war
from here?* Gather these materials,

these undrowned ceremonies—
tea poured into a cup, a woman
stepping lightly across green field

into a green pond—but don't tell
her the country of her birth
became a veined geography inside

you, another body inside your own—*Oh
Maa, she sobs. I miss her so.* You open
the door to step out to the concrete

veranda. Look: the moon is an ivory
scythe gutting another pond across
which the reflection of a young girl's

braid ripples. *Tell me,* you say, *about 1971.*

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