



ILLUSTRATION : MAISHA SYEDA

FICTION

Not talking in a city of
LOUDSPEAKERS

The rickshaw blared in the distance. Rehman felt giddy hearing his name so loud. He didn't think they would be so quick. Maybe they saved the rickshawala's number from the last time he escaped. Smart move.

KAZI MAHDI AMIN

The door didn't fully click shut. That was an ordinary affair in the house because the door locked to prevent escape. But, by chance or sheer good luck, it didn't fully lock this time. The click was off. Someone hadn't done their job correctly. Bloody hell, no one does their jobs correctly in this godforsaken country.

An open door felt like a welcome into the outside world. Rehman was slightly worried about his old-timer driver, Hanif, seeing him escape his own house. Hanif was always vigilant while they both worked at the secretariat for eight hours a day; he would hurry over anytime he saw his "boro sir". But there he was, snoring peacefully and drooling over his grey beard right after his 3 PM lunch.

Then came the pungent scent of freedom in the form of annoying horns and stinky puddles. That didn't matter much. After all, in the last five minutes, no one asked him "uncle koi jan?"

"Assalamualaikum", Rehman would say once in a while if the people looked too suspicious. Some replied, some didn't, but he was being cautious.

"Koi jaben", random rickshawalas would ask, but he decided to keep his mouth shut. The only thing he had learned from his seemingly infinite time in the city was to never talk unless needed. But at 73 and a half, it was hard to remember not to talk.

"Things cost too much nowadays."

"That storm yesterday was pretty brutal."

"How much to Syedabad?"

"In my day, I could get it for just 200."

"Everything goes up when fuel costs go up."

These random conversations struck up by a frail and gentle old man were met with both amusement and neglect. But it didn't matter. Rehman was having a jolly good time. No one

was pestering him about gulping down soup, and he wasn't being looked down upon with utter disdain by his servants.

You see, Rehman once had it all. He had no worries, nor any shortage of people wanting to talk to him. Additional Director Rehman Sir had everything power could offer, and he could change fates just by signing papers. But all of a sudden, everyone stopped listening to him. That happened once he retired. No "Assalamualaikums", and no guards standing up to greet him every time he appeared. But what surprised Rehman the most was the quickness of it all—how quickly once obedient subordinates forsook their old vows and renewed their allegiances.

He even lost power over the control of his own household. Even the son he always controlled with overbearing authority had not called back in three months. And then came the imprisonment, just because Rehman wanted to walk around and went missing sometimes.

But he couldn't walk far. He knew his legs didn't work that much, not because he was old, but because he rarely used them even in his prime. In a city like this, it was better to just wait in the air-conditioned cars, generously funded by public money.

Rehman decided to sit down on a pedestal this time. Since his last escape, he knew it was gravely important to take rest once in a while if one needed to escape.

However, that momentary silence was quickly interrupted by a new sound penetrating the multitude of noises flooding this city. A rickshaw with a speaker mounted on it slowly came near him.

"Important announcement—lost person. A 70 plus man wearing white pyjamas and a brown shirt has gone missing from Mohammadpur. Lost person! Lost person!

Lost person! His name is Rehman. He was wearing white pants and a brown shirt when he was last seen. Important message... Please call this number if you see him. Important message..."

The rickshaw blared in the distance. Rehman felt giddy hearing his name so loud. He didn't think they would be so quick. Maybe they saved the rickshawala's number from the last time he escaped. Smart move.

At that moment, when the speakers labelled him lost repeatedly, Rehman truly felt rediscovered. No one had looked for him recently, but now they did, because they had to. It felt good to be powerful again. But Rehman had no intention of being found.

But it looked like the rickshawala had other plans, and he stopped right in front of Rehman while the person with the microphone kept calling his name. Rehman was terrified: thoughts of his imprisonment kept coming back to him. He had to run.

The rickshawala, however, didn't even look at him. He strayed 10 feet away, pulled up his lungi, sat down, and started peeing, devoting himself to his ancestral right of discharging wherever men could reach. The one with the microphone still kept reading out, "Lost person! Lost person! Lost person! His name is Rehman! Lost person!"

Rehman remained where he was. Amid all the noise, the announcements, and the rumble of engines, no one was looking for him. But he was happy because everyone seemed to follow his rule of not talking unless needed. No one really needed to interrupt his solitude. It was pointless to speak to anyone in a city of loudspeakers.

Kazi Mahdi Amin likes scribbling stories when there's other important work to do. He can be reached at kmahdi007@gmail.com.

POETRY

If I Speak

SHAHID QADRI

Tell me what to say when I need to speak,
If I have to say something,
So what can I say: look at that
Body of the night glowing
Like a negro woman in silver ornaments
Or if I say: sweet-voiced rivers
Still singing—
No one will listen to
These poetic words.

If I have to say something
I will say: the navigability of our rivers
Is decreasing bit by bit; in North Bengal
Winter clothing is a must-go;
America or Beijing—a helping hand
To whom to extend to? In this regard,
What does civil society think today?
Whose voice will I adorn with
This pearl pendant of poetry?

I know assassins spread around in my town.
Many a time I wanted to use poetry
As a weapon to kill them.

But poetry wanders only where
Boys tangle in afternoon playgrounds with colored balls,
Or hide its face in the darkness of women's hair.

This poem has been translated by Md Mehedi Hasan. He teaches English at North Western University, Khulna.



DESIGN: AMREETA LETHE

KA DINGA
PEPO

KAISER HAQ

It is odd that nowadays
One seldom hears the words
Convalesce, convalescent, convalescence—

Another instance of thrallldom to binaries—
Illness/wellness
And nothing in between?

We are so much the poorer
Without an interregnum—
Remember a convalescent Tagore

Amusing himself scribbling
Gitanjali (Nobel Prize, 1913)?
Convalescing from a dread disease

Thanks to a three-week break
Between Summer term and Fall
I reread (once again) The Magic Mountain

And google the wicked virus
And the words and phrases that ring
Like ominous bells

Spreading fear of the insidious thing—
The Swahili
Ka dinga pepo—

Cramp-like seizure induced by a wicked spirit—
Whence Queen Maria Luisa's use of the Spanish
homonym
Dengue, affection—

In mockery perhaps of the patient's over-cautious
movements
Like the West Indian dandy fever?
More blunt, a Puerto Rican doctor's

Quebranta huesos
Led to backbone fever
While a signatory to the American Declaration

Of Independence
Suggested break heart fever
For the aftermath of fatigue and depression—

Such poetry in pain!
I'll spare you the phenomenology
Of my possession

But if you hated—really hated—someone
And wished on them
The pepo of dengue—

Of backbone—
Break heart—fever
I think I'd understand

Kaiser Haq is a Bangladeshi poet, translator, essayist, critic and academic. He is the Dean of the School of English and Humanities, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).



DESIGN: AMREETA LETHE

POETRY

IS & WAS

DILRUBA Z. ARA

Death dwells between is and was,
Riding the final particle of a fading breath.
We become the prey of its silent summons,
Without human flesh, death cannot claim
existence.

Death dwells at the edge of a chopped whisper,
Stretching into eternity's embrace.
In its palm, death cradles the acquired soul,
Turning is into was, meaning into echoes,
As useless as a split consonant.

Written upon my father's death in 2001.

Dilruba Z. Ara is the author of internationally acclaimed novels A List of Offences and Blame. Ara's stories and poems published in many international anthologies are studied at universities across the world. She has translated Selected Stories of Shahed Ali into English, A List of Offences into Swedish, and some of Sweden's Pippi Longstocking stories into Bengali. She lives in Lund, Sweden. To know more about her visit her website www.dilrubazara.com.