

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Of love, longing, and music
THAT MAKE US



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

But songs not only travel through space, they also travel through time to be rediscovered in unforeseen ways. Remember the famous lullaby by Tagore, “Phule phule, dhole dhole?” I learned it from my music teacher as a child, like all children who took music lessons in Dhaka in the 90’s did.

SHARMEE HOSSAIN

My mother’s house is beside a lake that separates the rich and mighty of the city from a little isle of people who work for them. Every morning, these working people come from the other side of the lake in groups, often in hand-rowed manual boats, and disappear into the belly of the big bad city. It gets dark when they return to their little isle, so we don’t see them. Once every week though, in the heart of the night, we hear faint music coming from across the lake. The deep and gravelly voice of a man keeps singing a Bicchedi tune “And then you left never to come back, my stone-hearted lover/ My love for you remained incomplete”. Thus once every week, the unmistakable soundscape of rural Bengal walks the mean streets of the metropolis, stands tall at the guarded gates of the rich and mighty, and graciously offers a balm for the broken-hearted.

Hearts are often soothed by such traveling tunes. I remember how, years ago, a Bluegrass song about a tree gave solace to my lonely heart. I lived in Duluth in those days. It is a small American town next to Lake Superior,

the biggest natural lake in the world. I was fresh out of graduate school and had just relocated as a young faculty member at a university. Since my teaching load was light and my heart was heavy from homesickness, most afternoons of the week I would put on a down-jacket and walk about to explore the town in the dead of winter. I never expected to find what my heart needed in such a frozen snowy winterland. But I did.

On one such exploratory walk, I heard a faint tune coming from far away. I followed it in a trance. The singers wailed in harmony “I am so lonesome, I will never know why/ I must stand alone till the day I die/ I’ll never get over this sorrow of mine/ The evergreen sorrow of the lonesome pine.” The words became clearer as the tune guided me to the hearty warmth of an old wooden pub called St. Benedict’s Tavern, where senior musicians gathered every Wednesday afternoon to play folk music. They were unexpectedly kind to the clueless foreigner and offered me a seat in the music circle. They sang me iron-ore miners songs of sorrow, I sang them a Bhatiali song, “To find you my beloved, I have left my home/ I have searched the depth of

the oceans to find the one who is not to be found.” We became friends bound by the tunes of universal longing. My new life in Duluth became bearable in the company of that group of old folk musicians. I met them every Wednesday till I left about a year later. Their tunes traveled with me back to Dhaka; my tunes found a home in those old miners’ hearts in northern Minnesota.

But songs not only travel through space, they also travel through time to be rediscovered in unforeseen ways. Remember the famous lullaby by Tagore, “Phule phule, dhole dhole?” I learned it from my music teacher as a child, like all children who took music lessons in Dhaka in the 90’s did. Throughout my life, I thought it was a children’s song. When my father was laid to rest for his eternal journey in 2014, I rediscovered it. It was a time when my adulthood, along with my siblings’, was put to a real test. We found it very difficult to grapple with the new reality of relatives who all wanted a share of farmland, jackfruit trees, and other ancestral belongings. My mother was in a state of shock, my brother was dealing with the relatives, and my sister had gone completely silent. I don’t know why but all I could do sitting in the crowded courtyard of our village home was hum this children’s song—“the birds sing kuhu in the flowering branches/ while I do not know what my heart pines for.” It was then I discovered that “Phule phule” was actually a song about loss. Quietly in my heart, I decided to say goodbye to abba through that song.

If you want to put it poetically, the sweetest songs do indeed tell of the saddest thoughts. Maybe that’s why music defies all borders. When the cries of a lover float under the Dhaka smog, when the sadness of the lonesome tree touches the heart of a foreigner, or when a heart pines for the unknown—we join them in a collective longing. We find an invisible companion in each other’s tale of sadness. Just as beautiful flowers bloom in the most insignificant corners, music also surprises us and holds us captive in strange and unexpected places. Then they travel through infinite space and time tucked in our hearts. This is one of life’s greatest magic tricks, and this is how it will always be.

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POETRY

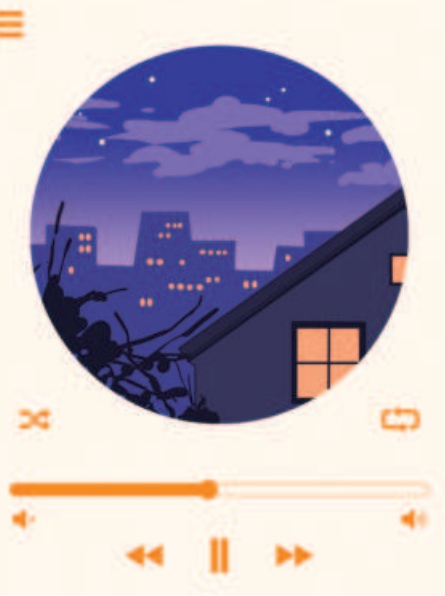
Shokoruno
Benu Bajaie
Ke Jai

Translated by Fakrul Alam

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

Who is the one playing such a plaintive tune on a flute
While sailing away on a boat from another land?
The note playing seems to caress my whole body!
It’s a tune wafting from some far away world
The pain of a heart strained by long separation
And unaccustomed pain drifting with the restive breeze
Towards a seashore shaded by forest trees.
In exile
And a forlorn heart silently sounds the Bhairavi raga’s tune.
The music and light in this unpeopled riverside path
Evoke in me the image of a dear one treading lazily
And heading for the river bank amidst forest shades.

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MUSINGS

The sound of Dhaka city

MAISHA SYEDA

Once on a particularly smothering hot day, on a CNG ride to work, I was stuck in the most heinous traffic for over two hours. Over the yelling drivers, honking cars, and incessant cursing over why the CNGs were trying to overtake the expensive cars, I was listening to my usual cycle of songs. As coincidence would have it, David Gilmour in his seraphic voice posed the question: “So, so you think you can tell/ Heaven from hell?”

Now if you’ve grown up, lived, worked, and tried to make it in this city, you recognise the struggles that this place throws at you. There is barely any time left after surviving this place, let alone exploring and living out dreams. So, to contextualise Gilmour’s question: Yes, I was the main character in my very own cage, and in the quietly accepted war that wages on in here everyday, I am merely playing a walk-on part.

But I think about Dhaka city a lot. Its people, known and unknown; its endless traffic and suddenly emptying streets; its treacherous heat and humidity, the suffocating crowd and the dust; the eventual calm after a pouring afternoon and the continuing downpour late into the night; the bright cotton clouds in early March and the crimson September sunsets. It’s hard not to constantly think about Dhaka city. Often it is so engulfing, and not always in a good way, which is why sometimes it is hard to explain why I chose to come back to this place, leaving behind a “life in bidesh” when I had already escaped—“especially when so many people [were] desperately looking for an out”.

It is hard for people, and at times for myself, to understand why for two desperate years—as Mohiner Ghoraguli put it—my lungs longed for the reassurance that came with the smell of burning diesel. It yearned to return to the heat, the stifling air, the overbearing hoards of people and the “haukau” at the turn of every corner. I often wonder if I romanticise Dhaka shohor because I come from a certain class of privilege that enables me to roam the streets at one in the morning and wear whatever I want—as long as it is inside the



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

boundaries of my “secure neighbourhood”. But that is a privilege I have now; I grew up in parts of this city where security wasn’t always ensured. And here’s the thing—and I can speak only for myself here—while there’s so much to change about this city, there are also things about this place that I wouldn’t give up on for all the comfort in the world. Dhaka shohor, for all it does, also creates music, and that music tells numerous stories.

All these places I spent my childhood and adolescence in created certain sounds that became the defining character traits of that area, and I grew to identify with the stories behind them. Like the rustling you hear in the ancient Puran Dhaka bakorkhani shops of the brown paper bag when the dokandars pack the warm delicacies to have with tea at home; the honking and rushing cars as

you cross the overcrowded Shapla Chottor or Purana Polton turn in the morning; the shuffling of books and papers in the old mills and bookstores of Bangla Bazaar when your mejo mama takes you to buy books from “where books are made”; the clinking noise you hear of a teaspoon against the transparent glasses standing in a tong er dokan in “Lalmatia Academiar pasher goli” or literally anywhere in Dhanmondi or Mohammadpur; or the sound of a booming laughter and the specific tone you have when chatting with your friends as you walk to and back from school. Looking back, these are the kind of sounds I remember my life by.

At times, thinking about Dhaka being a quieter place seems like wishful thinking, but having lived for a few years in capacious Australia, I have somehow grown to listen to

the sounds beyond just the noises and even appreciate them for the stories they tell me.

There’s a song by Shayan Chowdhury, “Dhaka Raate”, written by author Anisul Hoque, that says, “Nijhum shohor curfew dae pahara”. It is a rather curious piece of lyrics that breeds life into the city. If you’re old enough, you may easily recall the anti-hero Dhaka city had become during the 2007 curfew after riots broke out all over the country. I remember while returning from coachings during evenings in those days how the disposition of the clamouring city had changed almost overnight to be enveloped by a silence that was stealthy and foreboding. Dhaka had taken on the Big Brother esque role, watching everyone and everything. I realise now why the silence reverberated so loud at the time—I was not used to it. I don’t think many of

us are. As overbearing as it is, we are used to the sounds of Dhaka shohor—the “onek dure Komolapur-er train er bashi/ bus depot te briddho bus er hotath kashi”—they characterise this city.

Yet on days, I hear the blaring sirens a little louder. The screaming voices, the muffled cries, and the soundless tears are more terrifying and infuriating than on other days.

Shibu Kumer Shill dubbed this city a necropolis. Sometimes, it doesn’t feel like anything else—Dhaka shohor is where many people’s dreams come to die. From the boy who topped his classes in his village, came to the metropolis to realise his dreams, only to become another footprint among the shuffling feet, stepping on others’ toes to get on a bus at Farmgate. Many dreams are crushed in the train tracks, terminals, and streets everyday as people find themselves victims of hideous accidents. Such major and minor instances of brutality take place in this city everyday, and many act as though these are the inevitable collateral damages of development. And we, as individuals, are helpless to move even one cog in this mammoth, tightly wound system. How could we change a system that is bigger than us all? So the poet offers: “Kete fela gachh bhule jabe shob shok/ kichhu shobuj patar krondon tule rekho”.

But understanding and loving this city is perhaps a more complex and circadian choice. I make it because there are still things—intrinsic things—that tether me to this place. I have found my peace in the pattering raindrops during afternoons and the krishnochuras and bokuls covering the drenched streets afterwards. I found comfort in the winds that whistle outside my window during a storm at night. I remember to keep stock of the losses I must avenge. But I get to hear this city’s stories and made myself a home amidst them. So I accepted this “dhulo dhulo shohor” for what it is, and for me, there are these pockets of triumphant moments when I realise “ekhane modhu ek piece chaa-e./ kora ginger mara”.

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