

# That thing on your neck



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ABAK HUSSAIN

Every time you try to write, you feel those jeers ring in your ears, from your, shall we say, *self*—no no, not this self, but that other one; you know which one—the troll, the dark comedian, the eternal cynic who says: give it up, your words never have and never will change a damn thing. You counter by saying that's perfectly fine, that it's not the role of the writer to turn the wheels of history like an action hero, but to simply put pen to paper and describe what they see. But even as you say this, your protestations appear feeble and vacuous. Because sure, you can write about how we are living in an undemocratic situation where human rights and rule of law have been tossed out the window, where the authoritarian playbook is being deployed in clear daylight, where curfews and internet blackouts and extrajudicial disappearances are being normalised as tools to keep citizens under control, but... *everybody knows that already!*

Still, the facts pile up with nowhere to go. Over 200 killed, 11,000 arrested, many of them minors. A lady who works near your house says her son got picked up by the police on his way to work, simply for identifying himself as a student. Your university student friends say they live in fear but refuse to back down from the struggle. Undeniable video evidence of police violence filters through to your computer screen, and these videos have been examined and authenticated by foreign agencies with the expertise to do so.

That ill sensation you already feel is compounded by the reactions of the government—lies heaped upon lies, a pretty picture utterly disconnected from reality. An

**This dark feeling threatens to become all-engulfing, but now news trickles in, story after story from here and there of bravery, resistance, humanity. Students who flung themselves in front of their peers to protect them, friends and allies who offered shelter, lawyers who stood in front of police cars daring the jackboots to make a rash move. And you realise, in that a-ha moment that no, it's not you, nothing is broken within you, it is simply that boot, that weight of the regime, that thing on your neck that has caused this feeling.**

official throws out a barrage of contradictions: protesters destroyed the internet lines, no no we shut it off to enforce law and order, no no we are working to restore internet, it's back but no no, not social media just yet. This is reminiscent of what Jacques Derrida called "kettle logic," based on a reading of Sigmund Freud's exchange with a man who tosses out



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PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

all kinds of arguments in his own defence. The man has returned a damaged kettle to his neighbour, and when accused, he says 1) it was damaged when I got it, 2) there is no damage, 3) I never borrowed your kettle. Derrida uses a keen and close reading to tease out, among other things, such kettle logic in a given discourse, where a writer's or philosopher's own inconsistencies cause the argument to self-deconstruct. But here in Bangladesh, no Derrida is needed, because the contradictions are deafening, and the regime-sanctioned-gaslighting loud enough to drive one up the walls.

And so you fall into a sort of malaise. Your lived self feels misaligned from your true self and despair becomes you—this, you recognise, is what Soren Kierkegaard would have called "the sickness unto death." Your therapist can do little other than offer platitudes of well-being—stay positive, try gratitude journaling... that sort of hokum. Sometimes you wonder if something is wrong with you, and in the midst of the blackout and curfew, with no human contact, sometimes you wonder if you are the only one feeling this way, everyone else being happy and well-adjusted. You split off from yourself and hover near the ceiling, and start thinking of yourself in the second-person singular. Rhetorical flourishes can be a way of coping.

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feeling. Anxiety, depression, and helplessness are a natural, logical reaction to it, and in fact, happily prancing around as if everything is fine—now *that* would be the mental illness.

When the internet is back, you see the social media profiles all bleeding red in unshakable solidarity for those who demand nothing but justice and refuse to be cowed. A new generation, one with a conscience and a fresh pair of eyes is saying to the regime: *I'm hip to all your tricks, your algebra, your politics.*

**That thing—that jackboot—on your neck is still there, and you know it probably will remain there for a good while to come. You have, after all, danced this dance many times before and your capacity for youthful idealism—that spontaneous, romantic, revolutionary energy that says change is at hand!—is diminished. You have seen, read, and heard too much. Internet memes likening protesters to Marvel superheroes leave you cold, because you are all too aware that life is not a comic book or a meme, and real-world violence is not fun or exciting.**

For a long time, it was enough to call someone a razzakar to send a nervous chill down their spine and make them back down. For a long time, the older generation patronisingly lectured the youth with the good old "but you kids haven't seen the war like we have have!" as if our lives in Bangladesh post-1971 have been nothing but gravy. Many kept quiet and

there—so many of them unjustly killed, maimed, imprisoned. They and their families have been failed completely by a government that was duty-bound to serve and protect. Any government official responsible with a shred of a conscience upon learning of the events that have transpired over the last few days would turn red with shame, resign their post, and beg the nation for forgiveness. But not here in Bangladesh, because apology is not the way of the *jackboot*.

This is why it is all the more important that we acknowledge each other, that we reach out to and hold on to each other, that we lift each other up, and spread kindness, fairness, and the values of democracy and social justice as far and as wide as we can. Is that futile? Very well then, it's futile! But you cannot always take on the sins of the world onto your own

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Nor is the fight of good versus evil as simple as you would like it to be. Burdened by the standard pessimism that comes with dreary middle age, you know that tyrants never go gentle into that good night, and when they do, it is often tyrants who replace other has-been tyrants—think the departure of Ershad or the Shah of Iran or the last Tsar of Russia or Hosni Mubarak—and escape from the cycle seems impossible. And yet, and yet, and yet. The contagion of courage changes something in you—because that icy shudder of loneliness is now gone, that nonsensical jumble of thoughts has transformed into a more articulate stream, and now, wind in your sails from a rush of solidarity, you do that one thing that you are still able to do—write about it all. You know very well your words can't change a thing, but if there's even a sliver of a possibility that these words might travel out into the ether and let another oppressed, depressed, repressed soul know that they are not alone, then this debt of yours—of *mine*—is paid forward.

## Why cancel prisoners' right to visitation?



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TABARAK HUSSAIN

It is unacceptable that prisoners are being denied visitations from their families for over two weeks. On August 3, when we went to see our clients at the Dhaka Central Jail, we were stopped at the jail gate by a security guard named Halim and some other female guards. They tried to turn us away along with other visitors who had gathered at the gate. After learning that we were lawyers from the Supreme Court, they calmed down a bit. We told them that we wanted to see our clients, who were in the prison, but they said they could not allow the visitation. When we asked for the reason, they responded that it was an order from above. We asked if they had received the order in writing. They said they did not receive anything in writing, but were verbally instructed.

We then gave the security guard our card and asked him to take it to the jailer and requested a meeting with him instead. We learnt from the other guards that visits had been stopped since July 20. No one has been able to see the students who have been sent to jail over the last few weeks due to mass arrests. Even other prisoners, in unrelated cases, are unable to meet anyone anymore.

At one point, a prison official came to

the gate to meet us. He reiterated that no prisoners would be allowed to meet anyone. When we asked for the reason, he said they did not have any answers. He advised us to meet someone of a higher rank to get more details or to learn the reason behind this restriction. He gave us the phone number of the deputy superintendent of jail. Barrister Sara Hossain called the person and asked why visitors were barred from visiting detainees. He informed us that the direction had come

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Suspects arrested during the block raids by law enforcement agencies are taken to a Dhaka court on July 23, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

from the home ministry. He said a circular had been issued in this regard on the website of the Department of Prisons. We saw that the circular on the website had been issued on July 21, even though we had learnt from people at the jail gate that visits had been stopped since July 20. It is possible that the instructions were given on July 20 and the circular was issued a day later.

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and those who are sent to jail while their cases are still on trial. The jail code clearly states that all of them have the right to visitation by their families once a week for one hour. They are now being deprived of this legal right.

Another concerning fact is that ordinary people do not know about the suspension of visits. Some people are looking for their sons or brothers. They are coming to the central jail from Brahmanbaria, Bogura, or other places, quite far from Keraniganj. They don't know how their family members are

faring in jail. A lot of them don't even know if their family members are in this jail. I even found people who heard that a relative had been arrested. When they went to the police station, the officers informed them that the person had already been sent to jail. When they tried to visit them in jail, they couldn't. They still haven't been able to establish any form of contact with them. These people come to the jail every single day hoping to establish contact.

It was very painful for us to witness this suffering of the common people. The circular has been published on the prison website only, and many families are not tech savvy. If the circular had been published and publicly distributed, these people wouldn't have to travel from one district to another, making futile attempts to see their loved ones. Given the country's current situation, travelling is also difficult. The way the government ignores people's suffering disheartens us.

We believe that this circular denies people their rights. The constitution is the supreme law and clearly grants prisoners the right to visitation by their families for one hour a week. Visitors can also send them essentials such as food, clothes, and medicine. Many are now deprived of medical treatment. They can't receive or even buy their medicines due to lack of money.

The formal methods of sending food and money are also unavailable right now. We did observe some informal methods of sending money or clothes into the prison. But relatives sending anything into the prison right now have no way to confirm whether the prisoners they are sending the items to are actually receiving it.