



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

FICTION

At the birth of death

The one who laughs keeps laughing. Sometimes it goes on and on, and sometimes she pauses to take a breath. Others don't join her. Her laugh doesn't sprinkle light like a diamond. It spreads all over the room but makes no sound; it hits the cruel wall and returns to her as a rock. And she smiles the same smile back and forth.

MOJAFFOR HOSSAIN

One sits silently. Her eyes blink sometimes. Sometimes her lips tremble a little, or they don't tremble at all. A lizard climbs up her shoulder thinking she's a statue. It's only the memories that break the silence in her mind and body—memories of losing her father, mother, and brother, and her house, burning. There is no other recollection either before or after that. Only a few minutes of her 15-year past remain in her memory, and someone seems to play that nonstop on her mind.

One talks nonstop. She says whenever or whatever comes into her mind; sometimes she hurls the words from the tips of her lips before they have even reached her mind. Sometimes she picks up words that are not supposed to come to her. She says nothing about herself though. Not about people either. Only about monsoon, a few rivers, a couple of kittens, jam-jarul fruits, a few sour berries. The sun shower, the evening star playing with dolls. In short, she brings up a new topic every day, forgets it and then comes up with another one the next day.

One cries, she keeps crying. She cries when

she is awake or asleep; when she sits or lies down. She cries when she speaks, eats, or laughs. It seems as if she lives not by breathing, but by crying.

The one who laughs keeps laughing. Sometimes it goes on and on, and sometimes she pauses to take a breath. Others don't join her. Her laugh doesn't sprinkle light like a diamond. It spreads all over the room but makes no sound; it hits the cruel wall and returns to her as a rock. And she smiles the same smile back and forth.

There is one who does not laugh or cry or speak; she does not sit at ease either. She looks anxious, restless. She fidgets relentlessly like a headless chicken. It seems as if someone put her in a fire or left her in the water without teaching her how to swim. Or someone forced her to walk on slippery ice. At times, it seems as if she is sleeping on a bed of broken glass or sitting surrounded by snakes and worms.

Their eyes are open. Their eyes are closed. Their legs are spread. There are blood clots on their legs, fresh blood, dry blood. Their legs are lifeless like wood, as heavy as stone. If they use all their strength, they can move only a little as if they are pushing tons of loads. They have no

strength left in their bodies. They wait in the camp—but what are they waiting for? They don't know themselves. Those who become pregnant are dragged outside and pinched to death. Or they will be killed by inches—by raping, beating, or starvation.

But what will happen after the war?

No one dares to ask the question. Not even to each other. If it peeks into someone's mind, others huddle in fear. Such is life here that death seems more kind and inviting.

Thus, by spreading their legs apart, they live in the midst of death and die in the midst of life.

This story has been translated by Marzia Rahman.

Mojaffor Hossain is a fiction writer and literary critic of contemporary Bangla literature. He has published seven anthologies of short stories from Dhaka and Kolkata.

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POETRY

Of longings, of belongings

SNATA BASU

Women and the earth have to tolerate a lot.
—Kaaial (1965)

I heard it when my last light bulb cracked, the other night, blurring and retiring into invisible chemtrails, to a familiar pit stop of rage dotting on me, turning inside me writhing, even, in anger, stilling against the salving cannonade of screaming girls by 14th street park posts. I saw them emerge first with flash lights, then the air dimmed on them. NO! They resisted, holding over each other—armed with flambeaus, armed with nothing, armed with bodies used to the touch of the yellow-bellied night thieves. They romance with our wounds and come to collect names—she didn't have to be Nirbhaya, when she was scared to death. I will not say I was made to bear through these fractures, I will not keep in silence; in plaintive silence that maims every enduring gut in my incorporeality seeping into the riot, seeping into the rot, aligning together like constellation discs before the paling blue of the night, like oysters spread open and hewn away from the dulling shells that once housed them safe. The pith of our survival despairs in contempt, one thin glow of memory each, cram-full-cutting us belly up as we read the headlines of girls in boats, and girls in scraps and girls on the roofs in burlap sacks; Girls that teeth to split apart like tearing flesh from a vulture's cadaver. It's not their story, but they have bled too, It's not my story, but I am scathed too, What do you know about longing for a small place on this earth, of prosaic yearnings no quieter than what you have said too. Have you ever belonged to nobody swallowing beneath the night like a lion, blousing your vulnerability out into the dark streets, bathing and whispering into a clean, untainted wind like a free bird? Have you ever belonged at all, Have you ever?

Snata Basu is a writer based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her poetry has appeared on numerous literary platforms including The Opiate, Visual Verse: An Online Anthology of Art and Words and Small World City.



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Something smells fishy

K.M. AREFIN

The large green pond of Dhanmondi Lake was probably the first source of natural water that I had witnessed. It sheltered a huge number of people who have lived, breathed, and grown up beside this lake; the entire Dhanmondi area is intimately connected with its source of life. While half its neighbours lived in the mysticism of the lake, the other half was living in labour.

I was 5 years old when my family had shifted to Dhanmondi. A week after our relocation, I went to see Dhanmondi Lake with Abbu. Never having witnessed a lake or river before, my poor little urban soul was quite excited. As we were approaching Street 32, which was adjacent to the lake, my nose picked up a strange mossy scent. Sensing something unfamiliar, my small fingers tightly clutched into my father's hand. But Abbu started roaming the lakeside with me and my microscopic brain took in the environment surrounding the lake. My four-foot body was left in wonder and the mysterious lake appeared to me with the ocean's might. My little eyes could not even see the end of the lake and suddenly, I started believing the stories of 'mechhobhoot' Dadi used to tell me. I thought, monsters like the mechhobhoot must be hiding under this olive lake.

Eventually, our mindless roaming, the cacophonous crowds of Dhanmondi Lake, and the spicy smell of chotpoti infused with the mossy scent became part of my

childhood memory.

After I graduated primary school, Apu brought me a small turtle and we named him Sobuj Mia. Rather quickly, Sobuj Mia became my best friend, though the friendship was quite one-sided. Running back from school, I used to pick him out of his bowl and place him on the table. He seemed perplexed, suddenly finding himself out of the jar. Angrily, he used to run non-stop left and right and bit anything he could with his toothless mouth. During my school days, that was just another one of my heartless entertainment schemes.

While I cherished every second with Sobuj Mia, he didn't seem to enjoy my companionship at all; it seemed he was happier on the days I was late from school. He became more solemn as days passed, and within weeks, I found Sobuj Mia becoming unplayful.

Like all brown parents, at first, I thought he was hungry. I gave him an abundance of food and tried to kill him by overfeeding. Still, I just could not get his attention. In my childish annoyance, I complained to Apu. She smirked and said that food was not the solution to all our problems.

"I think you should set him free. You are still not ready to have a pet, I guess," she said.

"Let him go! Where? Where will Sobuj Mia go?" I screamed in terror.

"Don't panic. He is suffering for his family. All of us do. You must let him go home."

"But he will die...and...and, what will I do without him?"

"I am not asking you to flush him down the

toilet. I suggest you free him in Dhanmondi Lake. He may swim back to his family. You must understand that we do not own Sobuj Mia!"

"Okay," I replied in sheer pessimism.

A week later, I went with Apu to the Lake ghaat, just beside Taqwa Masjid. With my right arm, I tightly held a plastic jar full of water, and inside, Sobuj Mia swam aimlessly. I opened the jar and took out Sobuj Mia for the last time. Slowly, I placed him in the olive water of the lake, and I could swear his face turned joyful instantly; slowly, he began to swim in the "ocean" of my childhood. In minutes his dark green shell had become invisible in the olive water. He never even said goodbye.

Spring and winter had come hand in hand and I never saw Sobuj Mia again. But as I grew up, my connection with the lake grew deeper and I developed an almost mystical link with the Tilapias and Ruis, and the plankton. The Shalik and Doel became my pals, while the Mahagoni and Mango trees were my hide-

outs on the days that I bunked school. Even after all this time, I liked to believe that Sobuj Mia finally swam across the lake, found his family, made friends with the Ruis and Tilapias, and like all other fairy tales, lived happily ever after. In this almost religious belief, I grew up in solace and serenity.

27 monsoons had passed since that time and countless raindrops had flown into the of the lake. In the endless cycle of the planet, my small fingers grew heavy and strong. In so many ways, they were also scarred and harsh like the rainless dry fields of summer. I grew busy and heavy; my life stuck in the m i n d l e s s rotation of time. Now, every evening after office, I ran along the lakeside with my swollen body, keeping a strict eye on the pedometer.

On an unusual August evening, I was running around the lake when I smelled something fishy. The odour spread fast and my nose couldn't help but scrunch up. Over the hardcore metal song blaring in my ears, I

heard shouts that the fish were dead.

"Look! The lake is floating with dead tilapias and ruis. Someone poisoned the entire water bodies," the crowd stated in panic.

Street kids jumped inside the lake to collect the dead fish for their families and within minutes, the place turned into a snake-pit. The last light of dusk revealed the sparkle of a thousand glimmering silver bellies floating around the lake. It was the evening of the Fish Massacre of August and it left with a rotten fishy smell floating in the air.

The lean child inside me hopped a little and I hurriedly started to look for any floating dead turtles in the lake. But I saw only the dead fish—no sign of any turtle. As a rational adult, however, I knew that Sobuj Mia was probably dead long before the massacre. Even if he had lived all this time, he probably died from the poison that killed thousands of his friends. Yet, the child inside me was adamant. The way my brain deceived me for the last 27 monsoons, the inner child tricked me again into believing that Sobuj Mia somehow survived all the same—he was alive and well, gathering his friends and family to lead a revolution against the Fish Massacre of August in Dhanmondi Lake.

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