

Ruby Rahman
Poems and an Essay

See if you can

Leave him, Just see what he can do,
 He has no hearth or home, no common sense.
 Don't marry him,
 Could he support a family?
 If you can, test him a little to see
 what he will do.

Put an expired check in his hand,
 And surely he'll buy for you
 A yellow mustard field like a square handkerchief,
 a dancing river.

He is quite dutiful, do not you believe? --
 That morning I saw him
 with a basket full of fallen leaves

Going to the vegetable market.
 Mixing the green of lettuce with tomatoes red
 He'll put a canvas of Van Gogh
 into the housewife's hand
 And you'll accept it ,you'll definitely accept it.
 If, in the rooms of your flat, you want
 a few gardens full of butterflies,
 Or the glow of a field of fireflies,
 He'll bring them just like that.

Once in a while, pluck two or three mornings
 from eternity for him,
 Keep a slice of moon on the blue saucer
 next to the plate of rice.
 Right next to poverty, put all the cuckoos
 of Spring.
 If you can give without questioning, then
 give him some concessions,
 Keep him out of a calculated, brief marriage.
 Searching through glasnost, he might bring you
 the natural society of man,
 Give him a more elaborate marriage,
 make a few concessions;

Make a way for him towards Beauty.

1990

Left Behind

A century's dialectic
 Pushed and pulled at us.
 Soft grass was left, vacation spots were left,
 The amazing night at the dak bungalow at Chunaru Ghat,
 the intractable moonlight of the forest
 like Blake's tiger
 Striped with night and mystery.
 Farm gate at sundown was left behind,
 The long mahogany-shaded roads
 Left behind, left behind, they weren't fulfilled.
 Accomplished hands fly away in gusts of wind,
 Paint spills the brush,
 the easel cannot hold it.
 The silvery sky spills over the window
 And the eyes are dazzled.
 Still Kant and Hegel go on sitting
 grim-faced on a cane sofa.
 Here the crystal-clear water of this long century's
 lake was left behind.
 Here, our bricks, wood, paints, brushes,
 hammers and chisels were left behind.
 Paint spills out of the paint's can,
 a few pennies from the pocket,
 All the wheeling and dealings blow away like winds
 howling along the Banks of the river Padma
 The dialectic settles itself down in the brain cells,
 Get to know all the unfathomable mysteries
 from A to Z :
 The imagery, bricks, wood, and all the words of your hearts
 remain untouched
 Our hands move from sound to voices, from voices
 to the can of paint;
 Accomplished hands give overwhelming life
 but they can't stay still.
 Wind from the Padma River's bank
 comes charging in pursuit,
 The translation of roses remains unfinished

for years after years .

Beneath broken moonlight, the Acropolis lies in ruins.
There, the city waking up at evening is left behind.
Above the commotion of Topkhana Road
the flowering, boundless twilight
And our sitting face to face ---

All left behind.

1990

*Translated from the Bengali by Syed Monzoorul Islam and Carolyne Wright, with the
author.*

The Flute I Would Leave Behind for My Daughter

I wonder, what can I leave behind for my daughter!
I am in my late fifties.
I do not have the ability to buy a flute
that I would offer her when I would leave this world.
My mother had wonderful bright fingers
that danced upon the keys of piano-
She glowed like a tiger seen in the forest
on a moonlit night.
She held up the glorious arrogance of
the mount kanchanjangha
As she stood upright.
But keeping aside all those
She gave me a shawl--
An ancient worn-out shawl
Which she inherited from her father- in -law.
I wrapped up my entire world with this wrapper
in winter and in wet days,
In the days of happiness or days full of dismay.

The houses these days are cloudy and filled with clouds.
The cold winter wind always trespasses into the house
With endless effort I somehow manage to protect myself
with that worn out shawl.

As a star-studded sky
The old shawl is gradually getting filled up

with numerous holes.
 I have not inherited my mother's instinctive skill of mending;
 Cotton derived from lamb's wool
 That could have kept the shawl warm
 is unknown these days in the market.
 I can only faintly remember a flicker of fire
 That I found glowing inside my mother.

Nowadays the houses are too much cloudy
 Our days are ridden by bone-chilling cold.

How can I assure myself that
 My daughter would be provided with adequate warmth
 by that old worn out shawl ?
 Or should I ask my mother for that indomitable holy fire
 That I found burning within her !

February, 1997

Translated by the author

The First Line

God, you are supposed to send me
 the First line of a verse
 And, look, here I am sitting and waiting and getting dusty!
 Time Flew from one planet to another
 Giving out signals
 The stars flared up and died out
 embracing a timeless space
 The Universe was immersed in moonlit ecstasy.
 Yet a century is drowned in moonless darkness.
 Monsoon- filtered night goes in vain,
 O Yes, in vain,
 And I shed no tears of pain
 Though the sky goes on weeping.

Holding the green traffic light in my eyes
 I swing a lifetime fixed in traffic Jam.
 With outstretched hands I am that blind beggar
 Amongst a crowd rough and rowdy
 Standing in a stupor!
 O God, I thought you kept promising

to send me some poetic words
 But, look, the pages are still blank
 with no first line of a verse
 To fill up my emptiness.

June 2007

Translated from the Bengali by Shampa Reza, with the author.

Quarreling

The quarreling's been going on, I couldn't stay home
 The price of onions too high, but is it a reason that you didn't get it !
 Flowers bloom in the garden.... in the grass at Curzon Hall
 (Rabindranath, I'm in debt to you...). Yes, I know it's February
 Seminars, the book fair, final proofs—know you forgot it all
 Donned that ancient yellow *punjabi* and stalked out—
 I know, Bazlu bhai's on his last journey at the Shahid Minar
 And flowers bloom in glens. Yet insidiously I carry on the fight
 Though life's two-score years have long since gone by
 All right, okay, we shall meet the year round at the bookfair
 And flowers will bloom in the same way as spring falls
 Let us see whether peace can be availed in the hope of a Next life.

So clad in that yellow *punjabi* out you went
 The day went by bickering, love sprouted among the flowers
 In a squabble-and-moonlight-mixed spring night
 I saw in a dream
 You placed a tiara on my head! Oh!
 What an agony the vision brought —
 Oh ! the torment!
 You searched and couldn't find my heart
 So you placed the agony upon my brow!
 In pain I staggered and understood
 This was not gold, but a drop of ambrosia.

28th February 2008

Translated by Khademul Islam, with the author

Fantasy

In what profound blue you're sleeping
 on the right side of this wakeful me,
 sleep's peacock – blue artistry within your body;
 opening my human eyes in the radiant dark I see
 this integrated affair of sleep in shaggy midnight
is Satyajit Roy.

My body too stays filled with sleep,
 but on some nights dreams arise and called me
 and calling, carry me along the roads
of inexorable destiny; since
 dreams also have various urgent
and hear felt business with us
 for which the time of sleep is most appropriate.
Like a surreptitious thief it is
 so I take its hand and go there
 where in the end less river purple water goes on flowing.
 A false bridge juts half finished out
To the middle of the river;
 I keep standing on that bridge.
 Bending down, I go to gather flowers and sorrow
out of the water
 And at that moment my entire collection of sleep
falls out of my pocket.
 With a clatter, and scatters throughout the solar universe,
 And from within my flesh something else flies off:
 As if a yellow bird screeched and flew away
 Into the tangle of moonlight
toward nature's deliberations.
 These two sounds alone roam around
 and smash up the shadows
of all the trees in the city,
 Disrupting the prostrate dialogues of trees and stars.

I seat there awake on the breast of sleep,
 Fire burning in my blazing third eye,
following those tantric holly men –
 This season sits there awake
 Turning into frost, into a month of winter,
 Into the bleached white of skulls
in the display of a peahen's tail
 The white ghost of moonlight beckons from the window pane,
 Jibanananda's camel smiles sweetly
and rattles the doorknocker.

I keep my mouth shut. I warm my consciousness,
disguised as fire wood, over the ritual flame.

In this night, this cold,
December's last few hours,

the past gradually blends into the future
and pushes the future like a rejected , worn - out dress

back into the hands of the past;
And in this process, crooked deceptive midnight
enters into me and is fulfilled.

Like a self-absorbed bird, you sleep on,
And together with your nice full head of hair
You keep me covered—
Just as all the minarets, in their spherical cores, embrace
some emptiness, some air.

In this time of transiting
I don't know who is my master, who my lord.
With no other shelter I, Brihannala, see only you;
Holding this begging bowl smeared with peahen's blood,
Where, in what eternity, will I find that ambrosial fount?
With a generous right hand, let a few grains
of sweetness fall with a clatter
In this dark time of worship.

Infect my body with your glorious sleep.

1974

*Translated by Syed Manzoorul Islam and Carolyn Wright,
with the author.*

Notes:

Satyajit Ray is India's leading film director, best known for sensitive and subtle portrayals, of human life. Many of his films are in black and white, and set in his native Calcutta. Many are based on the novels of fellow Bengalis Bibhuti Bhushan Banerjee, Sunil Gangopadhyay, and Rabindranath Tagore.

A famous poem by Bengali poet Jibanananda Das (1899-1954), entitled "at bachar ager ed din" ("A Day Eight Years Ago") contains a memorable simile, of "a certain silence, like the long neck of a camel," ("uter gribar mato nono ek nis-stabdhata ese"), which appears beside the sleepless speaker's window after the moon sets. This vision prompts him to commit suicide, as it makes him realize that he can no longer bear the burden of constant sorrow.

After thirteen years of exile, in the great Hindu epic, the *Mahabharat*, the heroic Pandave brothers take refuge in disguise in the court of a king, in order to conceal themselves from their enemies, the kurus, before the decisive

battle of Kurukshetra. Arjuna, the foremost of the Pandavas, takes the guise of a eunuch named Brihannala, and dresses like a woman.

First published in Bengali in *Bhalobasar Kabita* (Love Poems).
Dhaka : Jugalbandi, 1983

To you, Rabindranath

You too had debts, daughters to give in marriage, grief;
You too had fevers, and market prices
 were just as rude to you.
Hunger, love, critic's gross, imposed pretension:
You had them all, even some small disasters
 in the General Accounting Office.
Yet the blue sky was of a proper blue
 and the sun, moon, trees and soil
Wove an eternal blanket of dreams.
The northwest sky set the directions;
There were clouds piled upon clouds,
And in the cloud-clusters of your words
There was no bitter smell of sweat or blood .—
From the heights to the depths
That refuge, free of fear, surrounded you.

Surrounding us are the century's final days:
The trees around us are no more green enough;
Grass and flowers are lackluster, like the
Soot-clogged wicks of kerosene lamps.
On a moonless night, a hesitant moon
 has risen into the sky
Without anyone's notice, leaving
 the mundane world behind.
In the midst of our day-to-day lives,
Death has become mere trivial death.

In the waters of your fountain, these days and nights
 in no way could wash clean.

1986

Note :

This poem is full of allusions to Rabindranath Tagore's own life and poems. Line 6 ("The northwest sky set the directions") echoes a line from his "Barshasesh" "the northwest sky's piled-up clouds rush past at blind speed without any hindrance." "The general accounting office" (In Bengali, the abbreviation *ejjapis-A.G.* office-is

given) is the bureau at which taxes and other bills are paid. It is the bane of many middle-class Bengalis' existence, in that records of paid bills-or even the cash itself--can be mysteriously lost by office staff and only found again upon payment of an additional--unrecorded--sum.

Translated by Syed Monzoorul Islam and Carolyne Wright with author.

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Coping with Others: The Writer's Dilemma

After the Bengali poet Jibanannada Dash died in a tram accident in Calcutta on a gloomy October day in 1954, an onlooker wonderingly commented that not even a cow could be run over by the slow-moving Calcutta tram: how come then that the Babu (gentle man) became a victim of such an accident! Should we consider this accidental death as the usual way for the poet and writer to cope with others, with the World? Or should we admit that Jibanananda Das failed to cope with the 'others' of his world and submitted himself to his tragic destiny? We may, in the same way, approach and brood over the fatal end of Ernest Hemingway who took his own life. In these two cases, was it a failure to cope with 'others'? Could these 'others' be easily named?

The Writer, like every individual in society, is surrounded by a crowd of infinite others. A few individuals even bear the entities of others within themselves.

These various sorts of others constantly demand attention from them. To respond to this is not easy. When it happens to be uneasy, it becomes a matter of 'coping'. It seems that the writer has to face such situations of 'coping' more frequently than other individuals in society.

Am I right in considering the writer as someone different from other members of human society? Yes and no. The writer is, of course, a very normal human being with a rather special ability to explore his humanity and that of others. The writer is a highly sensitive person. Additionally, perhaps he has a conscious or unconscious sense of a mission, which could at times become a driving compulsion. And he is unusually endowed with the capacity of self-questioning and social interrogation. What is the overriding importance to

me, at the moment, is the writer's (or for that matter any individual's) willingness and ability to recognize and empathise.

There is a familiarity that hides and deadens perception, there is a proximity that obstructs vision, there is a force of stereotyping-- traditional, social and psychological--that robs human beings, including our dear ones, of their individuality and humanity. I suppose, I am expected to know my husband, son and daughter, but I wonder whether I know them well enough, and fully! How sincere are we when we recognize one another? How real are we to one another? The writer's problem --not his dilemma --is to break down the various impediments that obscure the reality of human beings. So the writer feels the urge to speak out the truth that seems to be lying beneath the surface of the apparently visible Reality. Like a fisherman beside a river, the writer concentrates all his efforts on searching out the truth he looks for. In his endeavor the writer may come down to the street from the ivory tower of Art. There is Rabindranath going out to the vast open fields of Bolepur to set up a new education system for young people. There is Pablo Neruda talking about people's rights. Bhisham Sahni reveals the conspiracy of British imperialism working behind the communal riots on the subcontinent in 1947. Shamsur Rahman protests the inhuman terrorist activities of the fundamentalist activists in Bangladesh.

The writer cherishes a secret desire to change the world he lives in. He has a strong faith in the printed word. But every practitioner of the craft of writing knows that his manipulation of words involves a kind of reordering, subversion and change. The writer does want to change things. But he shares neither the Neanderthal simplicity of a George Bush nor the organized cruelty and indifference of governments to ethnic and religious minority. He recognizes grey as well as dark areas. Arundhati Roy has said it all for us already--I cannot do it any better. Incidentally, a brave man in Bangladesh, Shahriar Kabir, attempted to tell his people, in his capacity as writer, of the dark happenings that took place in his country during the past few weeks, now finds himself in prison on the charge of treason.

The ethnic groups and religions minorities in Bangladesh could do with more attention and sympathy from the writer there than they have so far received. Among the SAARC countries, India has a secular constitution while Bangladesh has its strong secular heritage derived from its liberation war. And yet, ironically enough, in neither country do the government & the people seem to really care for secular values. For instance, we find little or no treatment of ethnic or Hindu life in Bangladeshi fiction -- a clear evidence that the minorities are largely absent from our minds. This points to a profound psychological and sociological problem, which is hardly ever discussed in public. We do not yet have a Mahashweta Devi who treats ethnic and minority characters with great understanding and tenderness in her recent novels. I do feel that we creative writers, with some exceptions, are indeed guilty of a serious failure of imagination. Our sense of human responsibility has not extended beyond our own group.

In all these situations, the writer faces a difficulty to cope with the others who are around him. He has to cope with his family members, his friends, and his colleagues. At times he has to cope with the State and the government and even with a stronger global power. For example, after the 11th September devastation in New York and Pentagon the writer may have to cope with a powerful international alliance. As in the case of Boris Pasternak, the

State did not accept the truth the writer upheld, and inflicted penalty upon him. Sometimes the writer thinks far ahead of the others, and cannot communicate properly with them. History shows that the writer frequently fails to cope with others in such situations. But instances of his success are not at all rare. He carries on this ceaseless effort of coping, and his success is inevitable in the long run.

People like to idealize the writer, to associate an aura of dream with his name. As if he were writing upon a table of sandalwood, his pen were studded with diamonds. May I now turn, with due apology, to another aspect of coping as a writer that is rather mundane and could even be embarrassing to the successful and affluent among you. In reality, like other human beings, the writer too feels hungry, and may have debts to repay. The writer also has to earn enough to keep his body and soul together. There are in fact, few writers who are fortunate enough to earn their livelihood by writing. To become a full-time writer is still a dream for most of the writers of the world, especially those of the SAARC countries where the people live below the poverty level. It is quite impossible in this region to earn a proper livelihood by writing. So the writer has to do some other job that enables him to earn money. Consequently, writing becomes his part-time or secondary occupation. With a reluctant heart the writer transforms himself into a teacher, a journalist, an insurance agent which marks his identity in society. The n has to spend much of his time and energy making a living. Thus the writer has to maintain an existence torn by the contradictory pulls of his real passion as a writer and the distractions of staying financially viable.

The situation becomes worse when the writer is a woman, and furthermore, a poet. Poetry hardly brings money or popularity to writer. In view of the glamour of technological advancement of the 21st century, wise people do not show much confidence in the utility of poetry in human life. So neither the family nor the society, nor even the publisher encourages the writer, specially the woman writer, to write poetry. On the other hand a woman writer's concern for her children and her household demand has no less priority than her concern for writing. In fact, the woman writer is called upon to fulfill multiple demands.

This is the other part of the dilemma of the writer, whether a man or a woman, a poet or a novelist. No-one seems to possess the magic power to change the situation to the writer's advantage in the near future. Yet the difficult circumstances seem, paradoxically, to give the writer the impetus to carry on his pursuit.

Read at the SAARC Writers' Conference, Delhi 2001
