

Sofiul Azam

And So Farewell, My Country¹

(for Salman Rushdie)

1.

At this point of no return it's the flight I wait for
in the over-crowded departure lounge where I look
at a lizard a loner staying targetless on the wall.
No hunger I have for hugs nor a thirst for kisses
but I, long steeped in contempt, wish to know
if somersaults from one territory to another
ever help me discontinue the dropping of despair—
the finest of black pearls on this part of my world.

Dross yields impotence—remorse from every act;
so, I no longer agonise on every promise aborted
or why nothing ever comes as charming as exile.
No way but to break the threads I had so far twined
of the undeniable lineage to my next of kin and all—
a noose for a convict like me on the scaffold;
and this going has set me thinking if a change of skies
ever brings the cherished brightness against the dark.

I wonder if the brain well-tempered in the tropics
controls its traffic of thoughts and of passions—
all foaming on the crest of every moment's wave.
Strange that I'm this confounded at every next
step hobbling towards the final door and the take-off,
that I suffer bites of the things I'm to disregard,
the hard pull of the places I grew up in, soaking
their warmth's ink and wisdom like a blotting paper—
and long dead the pals' tug at my heart's strings?

2.

Oh, I'm dead tired of the way things conspire,
even this somewhat looking for familiar faces
turning for a Goodbye simply with a smile,
at the point of no return to this greenest delta.
Yes, I have never been much for telling like an orator

¹ The title of this poem is taken from a passage in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, a novel by Salman Rushdie.

(what if I represent the crowd enough for myself?)
all of my chronicles as torpedo-mines in the tide:
the ideas that I have not yet scrutinised
and that entangle me out and out in a snare
and the passions I kind of felt like an insider
for every inch of this landscape, these people.

3. Interlude²

*Friends, whenever comes a storm like that of Kalidasa's,
I feel a tug at my roots and a tremble in the trunk*

*as if I were a Banyan simply leaning for a downfall,
otherwise I would have stood upright until old age.
Forever will be lost birds' twittering from my greenery,
not to mention their flying on and on—wandering Jews.*

*Where will go those children who came after school
or those rustics for some trade under my umbrella?
This year the wooden trade will go up the scale
at every brick-kiln and in all domestic furnaces.*

*Or isn't it that I have lived in a kind of happiness
with the wealth of my green leaves—my trademark
and the roots' net long spread deeper into the soil—
a long, long time through summer and the rains?*

*Whenever comes a storm, I feel a tug at my roots;
I, too, have lived with this soil in my embrace.*

4.

My birth on the mud-floor of my ancestral village
does not make me love any of them green in the rains
and grey in summer. My growing up in a town
by the Brahmaputra³ does not make me love rivers
which you see fat like a greedy money-lender
and thin like a starving child. My reciting
poems from school textbooks or singing
songs in Bengali does not make me love
the language I was brought up to take pride in
for the martyrs of 1952⁴. Because nothing matters

² I had written this interlude originally in Bengali, my mother tongue which I had not used for 10 years. I have slightly changed some lines to fit in with the total design of the poem.

³ This is the river that goes by the city of Mymensingh, a district in Dhaka Division.

⁴ The people in the then East Pakistan struggled for their human rights to conduct daily life in their mother tongue, but the Pakistan Government did not approve of it. So, they opened fire on the mass who participated in a procession, shouting for the restoration of the language in any national activity, and some of them died on the

as does the final fall into nothingness. Oh,
my longing for death as goddamn liberating
does not make me think of it as something wise.
Why do things we count on not keep promises?

Who's that buzzing like a fly? "And so farewell,
my country." I still remember the cold
drowning of my legs into the slushy thick mud
near Grandpa's farmhouse and things like wheels
of an old ox-cart. My forefathers might have
been peasants braving the cutting of crops
in all tropical seasons like summer and the rains.
But I'm lost, harvesting crops of my Diaspora.

5.

I shouldn't give a shit about crying for anything else,
I was the one supposed to be Master of Ceremonies,
crying all through the hollows of the night;
oh, no love or compassion sparkles as fireworks.
I confess it's my passion I don't knit for this world
nor do I ever find out in the clear light of day
it has sucked me in and spitted me out
like the inedible stone of a mango in the gutter.
You may have all agreed on the sly there's not
even the slightest evidence with which to buttress
your conviction that my culture becomes an ulcer
or that you like a ratter should have lain in wait
for the rat rummaging in its archive of secrets.

A stranger in all lands as I am with a nomad's legacy
and may never be greening up with this greenery,
I fall in love with the supercharged jet for exile.
What will I leave behind as others hear my footfalls?
Dumping every other wish gone fulvous in a trance,
I'm so fugacious a man on each and every mind
or just a lampoon to be read aloud in my honour,
even if I muse on a pilgrim's mirage and the end.

Not in the least tragic is a double-born kid's tale;
to the wise eyes—ah, these mirrors of mockery,
only for fools do I clown around into folly's trap,
will soon be there dead, gone, finished, over:
in a flash it all comes and that's the truth of it,
the person's playing over in less than a minute.
Less firm my longing becomes for this exile
every time I listen to one's rippling tune of lament:

spot. This event is called The Language Movement in the history of Bangladesh, and this movement is responsible for the introduction of International Mother Language Day.

*Remember this slave of yours, Mother—I plead at your legs.
Even if death comes with the fulfillment of every whim,
do not ever deprive me of honey from your heart's lotus.*⁵

At last I see compassion curls up like a serpent
every time someone becomes desperate for it
and History the best of all freakish sages stops me—
a pilgrim on my way from nowhere to somewhere:
No one can evade his land even in nightmares.

⁵ The three lines are translated from “To Bengal,” a poem by Michael Modhusudan Dutt in the 19th century. This first Modern poet in Bengali Literature started writing poems in English, but later bloomed into a full-fledged epic poet by his decision to write in his mother tongue.