

Poems

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VOICES

My uncle hears voices –
He says they are those
Of God and Satan
Struggling
He screams out sometimes
Fighting
We know he's schizo
He's certified

In Bangladesh
We hear voices –
The United States
And Europe speak:
“We've killed millions
But we know how you should behave
We are your conscience”

God or Satan?
We don't know
But we know
They are voices
From outside
Inside

HARTAL

“Politicians are not human,”
Observed the brother of
Salahuddin, a fisherman,
Who was killed in a skirmish
Between two student wings
Of the political parties
In a *hartal*.
Two rickshawpullers –
One of them unidentified,
The other Badaruddin –
Were bombed while they

Were pulling their rickshaws
 During *hartal* hours.
 It took them 24 to
 48 hours to die.
 An auto-rickshaw was
 Burned to ashes, and
 When the driver
 Tried to put out the flames,
 He was sprinkled with petrol,
 And burned to death.
 It took him more than
 Two days to die.
 Truck driver Fayeze Ahmed
 Died when a bomb was
 Thrown on his truck.
 And Ripon Sikder,
 A sixteen-year-old injured
 By a bomb, died after struggling
 For his life for eleven days.

Why can't the word *hartal*
 Be translated into English?
 The western media call
 It a "general strike":

A mistranslation that is
 Not an accident.
 The *hartal* is the instrument
 Used by parties in opposition
 To bring down the government
 By forcing traffic off the roads
 By means of violence.

A "strike" connotes a right,
 A protest, but *hartals*
 Kill and maim –
 Deliberately.
 The populace acquiesce
 Through terror. The idea
 Of protest has not traveled
 Very well from the west:
 Words are deadly, and reflect
 A way of life which cannot
 Travel, unlike words.
 Our western-educated elite
 Brought the innocuous word

“Strike” to Bangladesh where
 It became the sinister *hartal*.
 Several other words traveled
 In the luggage to similar
 Effect. Now, western
 Newspaper readers don’t
 Know what’s going on here
 During a *hartal*, and we don’t
 Understand what they mean
 By a “general strike.”

Of two mutually
 Incomprehensible
 Civilisations, one
 Dominates the other
 And transmits, like bullets,
 Expressions that kill
 Salahuddin, the fisherman,
 Badaruddin, an unidentified
 Rickshaw-puller,
 An auto-rickshaw driver,
 Truck driver Fayeze Ahmed,
 And sixteen-year-old
 Ripon Sikder . . .

arafat day

a year ago
 this day
 yasser arafat
 passed away

thinkers
 writers
 journalists
 ignored
 the anniversary

they celebrated
 events
 donors would approve

so yesterday
 was “noor hossain” day
 commemorating

the martyrdom
of a young
activist
shot in the back
where he'd had
somebody smarter
scrawl
pro-democracy
slogan
at a time
in the cold war
when donors
were propping up
our dictator

the government
decided
to host
the south asian
association for
regional
co-operation

hence
nobody noticed
that
nobody noticed

the intelligentsia
forgot
his death
because
of cash and career
which both lie
in the west

transparency
international
says
we are the most
corrupt nation
on earth

they find the most
corruption among
the cops

the bureaucrats
 the doctors
 the whores. . . .
 but our
 amnesia
 reveals
 that it's the TI
 itself that is
 corrupt

the prostitutes
 that hurry home
 in the furtive dawn
 to avoid
 the respectable
 have greater
 integrity

they don't need
 to run
 from light
 from intellectuals
 who pleasure
 the donors
 for a fee
 by day

compassion

when i'm not in a hurry
 i face this dilemma
 when i'm in a hurry
 i never hire
 an old trishaw puller

i'm older now
 so
 i'm less in a hurry
 these days
 that means more
 encounters with
 my conscience
 and old
 trishaw pullers

i lift up my hand
and half a dozen
trishaws wheel
around
they are young
except one

he's in a dirty white
shirt and
a chequered
lungi
and sports a beard
of grey

compassion makes
me nearly turn
him away
then reason grips
my shoulder

if everyone
were compassionate
to him
he'd
die

LITTLE BY LITTLE

The average American
Woman
Is five feet
Four inches
Tall

My wife is
Five feet
Tall

From SUVs
To burgers,
American things
Come in outsized
Versions

Like America

My country is small
And it hates
America

The elite love
America
Because it's big
Like a bully

They don't think
How easily
America would
Squash tiny people
Like my wife and
Myself, no matter
How much we loved
Each other

Giants
Don't understand
Love
Only size

Little people
Like little victories
Little attacks
In little places
After little pauses
Little by little
Till little isn't little
A little here
A little there
A little everywhere
Many little people
With little to lose
With little pride
Little anger
Little hope
A little cause
Little eyes
Little fingers
Little feet

Little?

FIAT JUSTITIA

. . . there was a widespread belief that splitting the atom was merely a problem for the physicists, and that when they had solved it a new and devastating weapon would be within reach of almost everybody. . . .

Had that been true, the whole trend of history would have been abruptly altered. The distinction between great states and small states would have been wiped out, and the power of the State over the individual would have been greatly weakened.

– George Orwell, *You And The Atomic Bomb* (1945)

The
Orwellian nightmare
Has come true

Not *1984*

But the spectre
Of the
Unconquerable state
With its atomic
Bomb

But 9/11 would have
Cheered him,
And the possibility
That al-Qaeda
Might get their hands
On nuclear weapons

The vision of
A perfectly stable
World terrified him
A peace without peace

He realised what few
Of us dare to confront:
Better a world destroyed
Than an unjust world
Perpetuated