

THIS ONE'S ABOUT BLOODLETTING

ONE NATION, UNDER

Bangladesh, when the year 1971 began, was still designated East Pakistan, and it had just won the majority of that country's parliamentary seats in the first open election over both parts of the nation, which was split wide by India since 1947's Partition agreement. The British colonizers' understanding of the land they'd occupied for decades remained disastrously primitive right up through their surrender of it, so they drew the national lines arbitrarily based on what the majority religion in a region was — India largely Hindu, the two Pakistans, Muslim — and ignored the massive cultural distinctions between East and West Pakistan, including dominant language, degree of adherence to religious tenets, and the most obviously unbridgeable and absurd gap of all: geography.

West Pakistan held the physical seat of government, and from Partition on they had ruled both wings of the country by some combination of dictatorship and martial law. The idea that they should create a parliament through open voting in 1970 is, in retrospect, hubristic, self-congratulatory; the Bengali-speaking population on the east side of India were considered weak, sympathetic to the Hindus they shared a border with, and were known for their songwriters, poets, engineers, and academics, not their military or their religious leaders. No one in West Pakistan believed that such a fundamentally soft people could pull together a majority vote, and when they did, the West did everything they could to legally overturn it, and then illegally refused to instate the new parliament.

All through March 1971 they refused, hoping the Bengalis would pipe down and accept it; when they didn't, West Pakistan's military invaded Dhaka in an attempt to squash a revolution and to hold the cut-up country together. For nine months they killed people — reports range three hundred thousand to three million — and pretended that was winning.

REMOVAL

At the end of August, nearly six months into the revolution, Rumi and the guerillas from his unit gather in the family home on Elephant Road, where the mood has been jovial for several days. The 25th saw a successful operation featuring Rumi in the role of spy-spoof hero, complete with shattered Jeep windows, a shoot-out, successful diversion tactics. Now they were waiting, planning, eating meals under a roof, dispersing. But late-night on the 29th, men knocked on the door and removed (euphemism) Rumi, Jami, and their father Sharif, and a cousin from the house. In the diary the night seems never to end. Jahanara goes from room to room, to the dark roof, makes calls; she writes. In the diary, the men

say my removed family will be back in less than an hour. In times of war, here are some things (euphemisms) that happen during removal: atrocity, coerced confession, mistreatment of the body.

The diary does not describe the bodies of Jami and Sharif when they are returned to the house in less than an hour plus two days. Does not note bruising or gashes, if they are bandaged, if they have bled. The book — and, I suppose I should say, Jahanara — is fixated upon the body of Rumi: the body that is absent. And will exist in absentia for a long time, presumed dead different than being dead.

VOICE

Like any good millennial I read a lot about Bangladesh's history and even my family's on Wikipedia. I don't know how and where to rely, solely, on my father. To say he's biased. There aren't enough ways to express how soft a word is bias, here. I learn a lot from the diary, which I found out a few years ago was translated not by a writer but a diplomat. Someone invested in the story's lifespan, not its presentation. The English, often, is ugly, elementary. Events are starkly unrelenting; emotionality is distracted or muted or muddled by grammatical choices; no distinct narrative voice emerges. One thing I can't know is if the original is beautiful in the way I like to find texts beautiful. One thing I wonder: Why I want it to be that. Because I want people to be gripped by this story, and to feel moved while reading it; easier done when the words aren't fighting you. But what is the difference between a moving story and a piece of aestheticized tragedy. Why would I assume the original is preoccupied by aesthetic over event. Beauty-bias, we know, a leading killer worldwide.

ABSENTIA

Presumed dead is different than being dead.

Rumi, the uncle that I never knew, is believed to have been executed on or around 29 August 1971, that day he and his father and cousin and brother — my father — were taken from the house on Elephant Road for questioning (euphemism) about guerilla activities against the West Pakistani forces. I don't know what happened to my father in the days he was held, just a few before he turned seventeen, turned only son. I don't know how I will ever work up the courage to ask, and then to witness it.

It is possible that no one left alive knows what truly happened to Rumi. This is a kind of raw and ever-blistering wound my family and associated organizations have tried to heal or close over through the writing of books, the erection of monuments, the mounting of mass public protests, the execution of war criminals. But all this work around his periphery, this creation of errata, it isn't mourning Rumi. It's a mourning for the inability, perpetual, to close a loop. It spirals.

“Who will tell me,” Jahanara warbles in her diary, in the early days of September, then all through the last months of monsoon. For a while the entries, after she hears information that he was likely executed in a mass shooting of Freedom Fighters, start coming only every few days, or once a week. “It’s hard to describe the disruption, the damage it does to normal thought processes,” writes Max Porter, in his lyric novel about a missing child. “It’s hard to convey the sheer trauma of it, everything warped, inarticulate longing, unquenchable thirst for information, smashed right up against mundane orders from the brain or belly.”

Indeed, there is much living to do despite. She details the living family to visit and check on, the continued protections of the house and everything hidden within it — guns, jewelry, the much-beloved Marx & Engels, because it had been Rumi’s — and reading the papers and parsing predictions, cooking for visitors.

Above all, she demands to hear the stories. The deaths and tortures and takings of anyone she knew or loved. She would never be shielded from them, never believed ignorance could be solace.

It almost makes you forgive Antigone her brutal derangement in the name of an insistence on the body.

SCALES

It’s Valentine’s Day 2013, and the *Wall Street Journal* runs a night photo of thousands of people surrounding this large-scale reproduction of one of the most famous photos of Dadi in profile, looking strangely hale despite cancer and as old as she ever would, the scarf over her thick hair windy and purple, lit candles and searchlights and pickets all around this photo which, I’m not sure how to properly express this, is enormous. Years later when I find it again I notice there are multiple stories of scaffolding behind it, a reference that still isn’t enough to really effectively envision it.

The demonstrations in Dhaka’s Shahbagh Square began during my family’s visit the previous December, when the news broke that two convicted Bangladeshi traitors and war criminals, major figures, had their sentences commuted to life in prison rather than death. There’d been a quick escalation from demonstrations to strikes — Dhaka has strikes like Paris has strikes, semi-constantly and for reasons that are often opaque except to their participants — but by February, the generalized strike had become a focused protest against the apparently lenient life sentence news. Crowd wisdom was that the prisoners would quickly be released if a more sympathetic, more Islamist, party came to power at the next election. Death must be locked in.

The people putting their bodies in the street to advocate for the collaborators’ hanging death were largely young, a split of working class and students or professionals. Most of those bodies had not

been alive in 1971. They were advocating for their friends and families, maybe, or simply — imagine — for the continued possibility of life as they knew it.

And I couldn't stomach it. The arguments, to me, were so clamorous and vengeful. I'd held up signs a few times by that point, in Lansing, DC, Brooklyn, Manhattan. They were all asking, essentially, to prevent harm against various bodies: college-aged soldiers, pregnant people who wanted not to be. Never had the signs asked *for* anybody's blood.

My middle name, Jahan, is after my dadi, Jahanara, and I've never felt like I wasn't hers. I can hold, and have always wanted to, the legacy of a writer and educator demanding the rights and recognition of the absented people in her country. This was her life's work after the war and until the literal day of her death in 1994. She did this work without desiring the official backing of any party, which made her all the more fearsome in Bangladeshi politics. It was her presence that was powerful, not her money or associations.

Like many racially-motivated wars, Bangladesh's liberation included, near the very end, a slaughter of the intelligentsia: writers and professors, scientists, architects, doctors, philosophers. My unknown grandfather Sharif missed this fate but died anyway less than a week later: heart attack, and then a brown-out that prevented a defibrillator being deployed. As senseless, nearly, as if he'd been killed in his sleep for his profession as an engineer, a literal bridge-builder. And Jahanara a college professor, the rare woman with a driver's license.

Those two spared for the moment, and their youngest son (an article in the *Guardian* in 2013 refers to my father as Jahanara's "only son left"), but many others gone. Other husbands and best friends and mentors. Many, in short, who might have been in a position to bring their nascent, blood-won country to a place of health and flourish. Dadi's work was justice, correctly, for these people, and she marched and organized and campaigned for 20 years after the war, through grief and frustration and then mouth cancer, and through a general doubt that the nepotistic and corrupted self-servicing government that grew, mottled, out of pain and turmoil into the ruling class of a country she yet loved would ever recognize the Bengali collaborators as true criminals of war, however public the knowledge of their crimes. Justice, correctly, was demanded. I believed this my whole conscious life. But if I didn't know the designations, the consequences, of this demand?

If I spent a whole young lifetime fiercely admiring Dadi's work without once considering its logical and intended end was, in fact, killing people?

DISCIPLINE & PUNISH

On 18 November 2015 Abbu sends me an email at 8:30am, which means I probably opened it at work or on the way to work in the R train to Queens, which ran slow but reliably and caught internet. There was news, results. The strikes and protests that lasted over two years in the center of Dhaka were at an end, and in apparent victory. But I couldn't process what that meant for hours and then eventually days, too shaken by my dad's email subject line to read the article linked under it. The subject line was this, exactly: They will hang!

Still can't consider this email without bristling. There are petulant, even petty reasons: opposing exclamation points, hating the death penalty. But most simply it is this: Almost all of the time, my abbu does not feel like a person who has lived or labored through deep trauma, who is retaliatory, who needs symbols to do things. Driving through and even talking about the strikes, processing the experience, I did not internalize that he supported these movements because he wanted the people in question to die. But then here was an email containing a shade of some person, usually dormant, inside the generous and jovial man who is my father, who was glad — no, triumphant; the body of the email included the line “This would not be possible without your dadi's work” — that two men had been federally mandated to suffocate. This person didn't feel like my father. It didn't feel like anybody I would want to be associated with.

But here's another truth, late-given: Mojaheed, one of the two people who were hanged at Dhaka Central Jail a few days after that email, is the man assumed to have murdered Rumi. (In all the articles, Rumi only gets a first name, like Cher, and then a qualifier: the son of Shaheed Janani Jahanara Imam. Almost never see Dadi's name in a Bangladeshi paper without that honorific, which means mother of martyrs.) Mojaheed died inside the grounds of the jail, so that all the crowds could see was the tip top of the gallows. There'd been calls for a more public execution, I've heard; I can't read about that. But I do know forever that on an afternoon in November 2015 thousands of students and intellectuals gathered as close as they could to the walls of a jail to witness what they could of two old men swinging.

YOU CAN HAVE THE BODY

Because there wasn't one, it is possible Dadi imagined for a long time that it could be anywhere in the world, available to someone, if not to her. On September 14, 1971, a little over two weeks after Rumi is removed, Dadi tells her diary that Rumi talked about a girl he had loved in their last conversation; it would be, he didn't know, both his first love and last. Her whole summary of the affair is this: “She led him into the world of love and ecstasy, but in the end jilted him.” He was okay, he insisted,

because instead of staying hurt he had turned her into a symbol of — he was 20, forgive him — “true love and beauty of life.”

I can barely believe this could be true. That Rumi would have told his mother something so tender and consequential just one day before disappearing, and that he would have had such a stoic and tied-up take on young heartbreak. She also writes that not long before his capture he vocalized that he’d have no regrets about dying, that he felt he’d already lived both the best and worst of life. All the weeks he is gone she considers these last words, pacing up and down the hall of the house and reciting Tagore. I don’t believe her, but it doesn’t matter: what a magnificent last conversation to have given yourself with your firstborn son.

And on November 22, 2015, the man who disappeared Rumi’s body was hanged behind a jail fence, while I was asleep or while I rode the train to work again, I can never keep the time differential straight. And I did, I hated that. But it remains so strangely correct to be able to think of justice for my uncle, unmet and beloved, who never got to have a college dorm or a middle age or his nieces or his fully realized life of the mind, who had a first crushing love but never a whole round one. So correct, no other word, no way to avoid this thought, that my father got to have the body of the man who killed his brother.