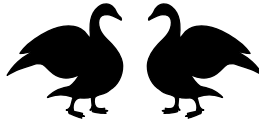


DRUMROLL SEASON



*she sits on the bed
as the rain counts out
the minutes of her life
on the tin roof
dhip dhap
a gigolo wind
steps through the grilled window
furls the pages of the calendars on the wall
obsolete all
2005 falls back with a slap
1998 caresses '99
she undoes her khopa
in a lightning crackle
and now the real rains
begin*

My name is Alo. I am six, and it is the rainy season. Nobody knows, but I can guess what people are going to say, so I don't have to listen most of the time. Sometimes when I have something else I want to do, I will jump into the future and answer from there. That way, I can finish talking sooner and go play in the rice paddy with my goat, Kishmish. The water is high today. I like the sound I make walking through the muddy field, the windy swirl of the water around my legs, the mud sticking, sucking between my toes.

This morning Abba was telling me about Kurbani Eid. I hate Kurbani Eid.

I hate it because Abba is going to slaughter Kishmish. He said it will be an honor for Kishmish, but I don't want him to die. Abba knows I'm afraid of blood, but he says I shouldn't be. I wanted to show Kishmish my new truck that Tinku Chachu brought from Dhaka, so I looked ahead to see what Abba was going to say. He was going to talk about how blood makes us all the same. A picture of Abba's body merging into mine came into my mind. It wasn't scary, but it was confusing.

"We're not the same," I shouted as I ran out of the house. I didn't wait to hear what Abba said. I never wait. It was Abba who told me that looking backwards was only for old people.

Sometimes when I jump ahead into the future, I see the wrong answer. But that doesn't happen very often, and no one seems to notice anyway.

Oh, I forgot that Ammu knows when I'm really listening. When I look ahead with her, she always stops what she's doing and watches me. When I get it right, she claps her hands and laughs, her gold bangles clinking. She leans down and kisses me on the forehead and whispers, "Now run out and play, my little prophet."

Joi is my older brother. He is seven and just started grade 1. Ammu sewed his uniform at night after dinner. It took her a month because she's not very good at sewing. Abba says she's not very good at many things, only at talking and wasting time. She only laughs when he says this. Her hair is coiled into a shiny khopa at the back of her head. She likes to shake it loose and retie it. Abba always falls silent when she does this. I wonder if he can hear the same thing. The electric hiss of her hair, the inky strands swish-swishing against each other, like rain waiting to fall.

Ammu told me she would make my uniform too, but that I had to be good or else I wouldn't get to go to a good school like Joi does. I don't want to go to school with Joi. He always finds a reason to beat me. Last time he hit me on my head, and it hurt so much I couldn't even cry. I just sat on the cool dirt floor of the compound and tried to push the pain out of my body in short bursts. *Push*, I thought. *Go*. I didn't think I was making any sound, but Ammu ran in and asked me what was wrong. I couldn't concentrate on pushing and talking and so I didn't say anything.

"Just let him be," Abba said from the doorway, reknitting his blue checkered lungi, "You make him weak with all your fussing." He turned away and bumped into Joi. "What are you doing?" he asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," Joi said quickly.

"Then go to bed."

“But I have homework,” Joi said. He loves saying that he has homework, especially English homework. Abba always leaves him alone then because he doesn’t know English. Ammu can’t read Bangla or English, but still she sits with Joi every night, looking over his shoulder by hurricane lamp light. She says if he studies hard, he can be like her Nana who used to be the school headmaster. But Joi doesn’t want to be headmaster. He wants to be the superintendent of police like Mr. Rahman. Then he can beat up anyone, even in front of Abba and Ammu. Lately he pretends to load and cock a gun at me when he thinks I’m being bad. I’ve seen Mr. Rahman cock his pistol, so I know he’s doing it wrong, but I always run away anyway.

In the middle of my pushing and breathing, I saw Abba and Ammu walking away from me, Ammu’s black burka billowing around her. I gathered my strength, stuffed it back small and tight into my body, and I called, “Don’t go!”

When the sound cleared, like ripples in the paddy water, I realized that they had not gone anywhere. They were still standing there, looking at me. I had jumped into the future wrong. And Ammu wasn’t wearing her burka. She was wearing a green sari.

In the morning, I woke up with a buzzing sound in my ears. I ran to find Ammu, but she had gone to the market to buy vegetables. Abba was in the field. I could see Kishmish nuzzling up to him, not knowing that Abba was going to kill him in two days. I jumped over the step to our front door to avoid stepping on the flowers Ammu had painted on it during Poila Boishak.

As I came closer to the field, the buzzing died down, and the paddy voices came. There was the noise of the insects, the wind through the rice, Kishmish’s hungry bleats. I knew what he wanted. He wanted the leaves from his favorite bush near our house, the one with the tiny red and white flowers. I had forgotten to bring them as I did every morning. I turned and ran back.

The bush was almost bare because I had given so many of its leaves to Kishmish. I had to find another bush soon. Then I remembered Kurbanī Eid. In two days, I wouldn’t need to find any more leaves. Tears came to my eyes, and the buzzing grew louder again. I shook my head violently and then carefully bent a leaf stalk where it met the branch. It came off easily with a snapping sound, a silky liquid immediately forming a translucent bubble at the base. I wondered what the leaf tasted like. I looked around and then put the leaf in my mouth and chewed. The buzzing made the sound of my chewing loud inside my head as if someone had plugged up my ears. *Crack, crush*. The leaf broke into slats and slivers in my mouth, and I spat green fibers on the ground. It tasted

horrible. But Kishmish seemed to like it, so I got another leaf and ran back to the paddy, spitting leaf bits on the way.

Abba straightened and looked at me as I stood on the embankment. Tinku Chachu was with him. I quickly wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Are you the one trampling our paddy?” Abba asked. His voice was like the river but different every day. Some days I was like Tinku Chachu’s boat and could follow it, seeing everything. Other times I couldn’t even come close because the water was too fast. Today I was a fish in Abba’s river, not understanding what was happening above the water. But I could feel Abba’s feelings, undercurrents against my fish body. I stood on one leg as if it were a fish tail and twisted about, trying to listen.

“Of course you’re the culprit.” Abba said impatiently, turning away, “You and that stupid goat. Kishmish! Jah! Bhag!”

Kishmish moved a meter away and then leaned back towards Abba. Abba raised his hand.

“Kishmish, come here!” I shouted.

Tinku Chachu looked at me curiously and then whispered something to Abba.

Abba replied, “It’s just the way he talks. He will outgrow it. I am more concerned with his behavior. He doesn’t listen.”

“You should consider that madrasah I told you about, where Belal Bhai teaches.”

Abba shrugged and shooed Kishmish towards me. Kishmish gamboled out of the paddy to get his leaf. As his nose snuffled noisily in my palm, the buzzing in my ears died down.

The night before Eid, I told Ammu that we had to save Kishmish.

“Ammu, he’s not very big. Maybe we can find a bigger goat for Abba,” I said pulling at her ankle.

“Alo, I’m cooking for tomorrow, can’t you see?” Ammu said, pulling her sari straight. She pressed her lips together, their fullness disappearing even as their color deepened. Abba said Ammu was too proud of her looks, that she was just a farmer’s wife and there was no need for airs, for the lipsticks she craved. But I liked it when she wore lipstick. She’d bring her mouth very close to my face and make smacking fish lips at me. I’d try not to move, watching the lips descend, the redness separating into the soft damp creases of her mouth. Closer and closer, till I could see each vermilion indentation separately, a velvet pattern that enveloped first my vision and then roaringly, every other sense. Invariably I’d squeal and run away laughing.

“She’s going to be cooking Kishmish tomorrow!” crowed Joi from the corner of the kitchen where he was sitting on a squeaky gray mora and eating an imperfectly triangulated shingara.

A line of pale shingaras sat beside the stove, their doughy edges pressed closed with the tines of our only fork. Ammu slid one into the skittering oil, and its body bloated unevenly, absorbing the gold liquid, fizzing, sizzling.

“You’re going to be cooking Kishmish tomorrow!” I wailed.

“Speak clearly,” Joi said sharply.

I looked at him confused. Ammu splashed the shingara over in the oil with the fork and then ruffled my hair.

“Baby boy, you have to forget about the goat. Your father bought him for Kurbanī Eid, and we have to sacrifice him for God. I’ve told you why, haven’t I? The story of Ibrahim? Do you want to hear it again?”

“Yes,” I sobbed. I knew all the animal stories by heart, but I loved hearing Ammu tell them. The story of the spider that saved the Prophet’s life, and Jonah who was swallowed by a whale, and Noah and his pairs.

“He can’t even say yes properly,” Joi said scornfully.

“I can too!” I shouted so that my voice wouldn’t shake, “Yes, yes, yes!”

But Joi laughed and kept laughing until Ammu slanted her eyes at him dangerously. She fished the shingara out of the oil and bobbed in two more.

“Joi’s mother,” a voice broke into the kitchen. We all turned. It was Abba. Ammu looked at him questioningly.

“Come,” he said, his voice a slow tumult of waves. His shoulders were hunched under his white tank top. My body is scrawny like Abba’s. Not like Joi’s, whose face and demeanor were more like Ammu’s. I didn’t mind. I was going to work in the fields too when I grew up, and I would have lots of goats.

“I’m cooking,” Ammu said, gesturing towards the glistening pan.

“I said come, July. I just spoke with Tinku. Bhabhi told him something that you will have to explain to me.”

Ammu’s face tightened in fear. She turned off the stove and left the kitchen quickly, the bottoms of her feet scratching against the dirt on the concrete floor. I shut my eyes to see if I could see anything. All I saw were the flames of the stove fire being inhaled into black. The creak of the mora spun my head around. I looked for Joi, but he had already pushed past me and left the kitchen.

I didn’t have to move to hear what Abba was asking or Ammu’s responses. In our house, everything bounced off the stone, wriggled through the thatching,

ate into the wood beams. Sometimes I felt as porous as everything else. There was an old rickshawallah who cycled Ammu and me home once in the rain. His threadbare gamcha had slapped against his body as he pumped at the pedals. I tried to pull the plastic sheet over Ammu's legs so that she wouldn't get wet, but she didn't seem to notice. If I stood still enough, perhaps the world itself would pass through me like the water through the gamcha.

"Ninu Bhabi said she saw you coming out of the police house," Abba's voice was as smooth as melting ice.

"It's not what you think—" Ammu said shakily. A sharp slap sounded followed by her cry.

"I know that my wife paints herself into a whore when she goes to town."

Another slap and then a harder sound, and Ammu cried out again.

"And now this. You go to the house of that man. The man who locked your cousin in jail. Have you no shame at all? Even if not for yourself, for your family?"

"He said . . . he told me he would help Mintu. He said he could," Ammu said in a rush, her words running together.

I remembered the day we went to Mr. Rahman's house. It had been raining all afternoon, and I wanted to go home, but Ammu said she had to go see him. His house was where the houses stopped and the fields began. He had started cleaning his gun, putting each piece on the table with a careful click. When Ammu had tried to say something, he raised his hand silencing her. When he was finished, he loaded and cocked his pistol at me. Ammu went away and then so did Mr. Rahman. Only a small cloth and a blackened brush sat on the table. I stood in the quiet room and thought about Kishmish.

I could no longer separate Abba's words from the slaps. Ammu cried all night that night. She was trying to be quiet, but I could hear her. I couldn't sleep. I had to save Kishmish, and Ammu was not going to be able to help me. Maybe I could lead him away from the paddy, far down the river, so he wouldn't be able to find his way back. I wouldn't be able to play with him, but at least he wouldn't die. Yes, that was what I would do. Suddenly I felt Abba shaking me.

"Get up," he said, "We're going to prayers."

Was it morning already? Had I fallen asleep? Had Ammu stopped crying? Where was Kishmish? Joi was getting dressed in the darkness. He reached out and pulled me from the pallet, not un-gently. I followed him into the compound. Kishmish was tied to a tree close by. I started towards him, but Abba pulled me away, and we joined an uneven stream of men and boys walking to prayers.

Abba kept me close to him the whole dawn, his hand tight on my wrist, as if he knew what I was thinking. The chanting sound of praying usually thrilled me, but even that sounded ugly this morning. Abba's grip grew firmer as we walked back over the broken brick path to our compound. He instructed Joi to bring Kishmish to the far side of the pond. I hadn't dared to move away until then, but when I understood that Abba meant to keep me by him while he killed Kishmish, I started struggling and shouting. My voice sounded shrill and weak compared to Abba's monotone. He took no notice and went on talking to Joi and Tinku Chachu. He gave my hand to Joi and told him not to let go. I heaved at Joi, whose hold slackened until he had to use both hands. I called for Ammu, but she was nowhere to be seen.

It was as if Kishmish didn't know what was happening, even when Tinku Chachu tied up his legs. He lay on the muddy ground quietly and even licked Tinku Chachu's hand. My voice faded inside my head. It was only at the end that Kishmish struggled, when the blood started coming. By then I couldn't hear him. I could hear the blood though, slipping through the grass, pressing the blades aside, sinking into the wet ground. One dot of red opened like a flower on my kurta and then another. Kishmish watched us, watched himself pool around us. His eye swiveled and swiveled and then went flat.

One week after Eid, on a breezy day, Abba and Ammu took me on a rickshaw and then on a baby taxi and then a bus. The fields got farther and farther apart, and soon there were no fields, only rows of shops. Finally, we arrived outside a bright blue building. Ammu waited outside, her burka a cloud against the blue wall. Abba led me inside. We walked through a stone courtyard and into a small room. A man sat at a wooden desk, dressed all in white. Abba handed him an envelope and started speaking. I couldn't follow his voice anymore. I was too tired.

The man took my hand, and the three of us walked back into the courtyard. I heard a humming sound and turned. It was coming from one of the rooms of the building. The humming turned into a chanting. I liked the sound. It made me think of the banana leaf flute Abba made me during the last monsoon. If you held the leaf taut and blew through the holes, it made a spiraling sound that swelled and shrank. The man held my hand, and then Abba and Ammu were standing outside the courtyard. Ammu's veil was wrapped around her face. Only her eyes were showing. They turned and walked away, Ammu's burka billowing in the clamorous wind.