

## NTM Premiere: 6 Poems by Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah Translated from the Bengali by Mohammad Shafiqul Islam



Today, National Translation Month is proud to present in premiere six new translations of poems by the revolutionary poet **Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah** translated from the Bengali by the accomplished poet and translator **Mohammad Shafiqul Islam**. The language of these poems is fiery and sorrowful. We fell in love with these unforgettable, romantic, and merciless lines—and we hope you will, too.

**We'd love to hear from you!** Find us on Twitter [@TranslateMonth](#), tag us using #NTM2018 and #TranslateMonth2018, join our mailing list, submit a translation month event, or like our [Facebook](#) page. And celebrate translations from all over the world and close to your heart this September and beyond.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

**6 Poems by Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah**  
*Translated from the Bengali by Mohammad Shafiqul Islam*

**O MY DESPONDENT BEAUTY**

I dream the whole night, whole day,  
as the sky sees the earth and the earth the sky,  
once in darkness, then in light,  
once with soaked eyes,  
then at weary twilight sunshine –  
I dream the whole night, whole day.

A distant face radiates in blue,  
an artiste plays mournful music in dream,  
draws in the lovely and distant face,  
colorful melancholy.

I tell him to return – indifferent, the artiste  
doesn't stop . . .

I dream the whole night, whole day –  
O my despondent beauty in dream,  
why do you appear cruel before my eyes today?  
In human form, in a mortal's facade  
why do you ask me today how I am?

O my despondent beauty,  
why does so much water splash in the body  
breaking the heart today?  
Why does spring return in the air  
in foggy winter today?

Who's the flutist playing in dream?  
He'd always play melancholic music –  
where's he gone today?

I draw you with the color of agonies,  
I paint you with blood in my heart,  
my solitary love woven with agonies and dreams –  
it's you my love – o my despondent beauty.

Tearing all ties, you've come to my heart!  
Tree shades, riverbanks – they give your address!  
I've scattered my prayers like seeds,  
water nourishes them, soil gives them space,  
you're their cherished harvest –  
why then do you fly to me like cotton in the air?

I recall birth at the smell of burnt chaff today!  
Childhood, adolescence merge in feral spring air,  
why is the night so long?

O my despondent beauty,  
with flood of tears in the eyes  
why do you come now –  
this arid and ominous time?  
At the end of all pleas,  
why do you come with empty hands today?  
Why, my despondent beauty,  
why do you come?

## **CONCENTRATION CAMP**

His eyes were blindfolded.  
The first boot kick sprinkled his face with blood.  
Bruised lips turned one with blood and saliva.  
As soon as he moved his tongue,  
two broken teeth fell on the concrete.  
Ma . . . beloved Ma . . . he cried aloud.

A 555, half-smoked cigarette  
touched his chest first.  
An odd smell of burnt flesh spread in the air.  
They pushed burning cigarettes into his body  
to make blisters like luscious grapes.

At the second kick, his body curved like a bow,  
he couldn't cry this time.  
He was forced to lie on the back.

Two pairs of boots, black and cruel, rode on his belly  
as he spoke of pains in his stomach,  
he spoke of poverty and hunger.

He spoke of people's right to clothes –  
probably for that,  
they pulled his shirt off his body.  
They put off his pants – nude, he looked hideous.

His two hands –  
fisted hands had flown in rage like flags in processions,  
the hands had set posters, distributed leaflets,  
those hands were broken with iron hammers.  
Lively hands – they're the hands of living humans.

His ten fingers –  
the fingers had touched his mother's face, brother,  
and the mole in his beloved's cheek.  
The fingers had touched friendly hands trained in warfare,  
the dream weapons,  
those fingers were smashed with weight scales.  
Lively fingers – they're people's living witnesses.

With iron pincers,  
they uprooted his innocent nails one by one.  
How terrifically red the color of blood!

He's no more now.  
His whole body is covered with scarlet blood –  
it seems *krishnachura* flowers bloomed.

One of his battered hands  
is lying flat on the country map,  
blood's haughty lava oozes from the hand.

## FROM THE SCAFFOLD

Our journey begins from the scaffold.

An intellectual death is equal to a birth,  
a promise-laden stairway to death  
hoists hands high in stormy darkness –  
our struggle still begins in dreary darkness.

From the scaffold,  
from the land of deaths  
we ascended first.  
You call it death, an end, or termination to the root,  
seeing the searing faithful eyes buried deep, I proclaim  
these deaths aren't any end, or ruin, or any fall at all . . .

Our sunny paths start from these deaths,  
from this scaffold, our journey begins.

## DELUSION

What sort of delusion is this!  
While so close it seems you're far away, beyond reach,  
the periphery of distance to the sky.  
If you come, climate and nature appear different,  
another geography emerges,  
all equators take different meanings –  
if you come, it seems the sky smells soaked.

If you keep hands, it seems they didn't touch my hair,  
the fingers escaping affection are very cruel.  
If I take a glance at you, you seem to stare at me,  
forlorn and exhausted bestowal escapes bare-footed  
like distressing shadows moving to other images.  
When you come, it seems you could never come . . .

If I ask your wellbeing, it seems you didn't come,

even if I sit beside you, it seems you didn't come.  
If I hear a knock at the door, it seems you've come,  
if I open the door, it seems you didn't come.

If you say you'll come, it appears a forewarn of danger,  
weather-forecast – cautionary signal number eight, nine,  
downward pressure, north, west –  
when you come, it seems you could never come.

If you go away, it appears you came,  
if you depart, it seems you're ubiquitous.

## COMPLIMENTS

If we meet, why do we still ask:  
how are you?  
Why don't we ask: did you have breakfast?  
Hello, did you eat in the morning?

If we meet, why do we still ask:  
how are you?  
Why don't we ask: did you have lunch? Rice?  
Last night? At noon before yesterday?

If we meet, why do we still ask:  
how are you?  
Why don't we ask: can you tone with the secondhand?  
Can you buy saris for your wife?

If we meet, why do we still ask:  
how are you?  
Why don't we ask: do you have a house in the city?  
Rented house? How much is the rent?

If we meet, why do we still ask:  
how are you?  
Why don't we ask: where's the corpse?

Why do they open fire in public streets?

If we meet, why do we still ask:

how are you?

Why don't we ask: how far is the movement?

Will the world burst in strike?

Why don't we ask: military or mass?

Which side – rich or humans?

## **POSTMORTEM**

You stood before self-revelation.

You're a woman –

family, children, house rent, chili, onion,  
from ten to five, national actress by Crescent Lake  
or Baily Road in the afternoon, only acting,  
only masks of words, beautiful, aristocratic, suave.

You embody a complex life in the name of beauty –

sari, TV, VCR,  
old love memory with one or two furtive kisses,  
good smell, captivating sex appeal,  
healthiness that is truly an exploitation,  
just a survival,  
such is life, maybe well . . .

You denote deception, Karl Marx, Lenin adorned in showcases,

fiery speeches on stage in favor of the working class,  
lying on a bed of four-inch foam,  
hands on open breasts, dreams in the eyes –  
houses with balconies,  
visiting monuments by a high-speed private car.

You stood cordoning the path of self-revelation,

you represent prison, the golden fetter of union,  
not returning home unsteady at midnight,  
a warm bed merged with fragrant passionate flesh.

You stand for glittery happiness, silvery failure,  
not bread and pulses by footpath at noon,  
beautiful aristocratic life in endless leisure,  
bribery, black money,  
cocktail parties,  
hands on the shoulders of friends' wives, secret touches,  
mother's elopement with the son-in-law,  
blue – blue –  
still women are chaste, husbands wife-loving.

Clowns suit well in the role of physical beauty,  
only blood pressure increases, sugar in urine and  
lots of sleepless nights –

there's no beauty anywhere.  
The smart name of exploitation is beauty now –  
you're the stupid symbol of that beauty.

You stood before self-revelation.

### **About the author**



**Rudra Muhammad Shahidullah**, one of the most popular and acclaimed Bengali poets, was born in Bagerhat, Bangladesh, in 1956. His poems are widely read by Bengali readers around the world. He is well-known as a romantic and revolutionary poet. He has seven collections of poetry to his credit. Besides poetry, he wrote short stories, plays, and song lyrics. He died in 1992.

**About the translator**

**Mohammad Shafiqul Islam** is the author of three books: *Wings of Winds* (Poetry, 2015), *Humayun Ahmed: Selected Short Stories* (Translation, 2016) and *Aphorisms of Humayun Azad* (Translation, 2017). In February 2017, he was a poet-in-residence under at the Anuvad Arts Festival, India, and his poetry, translation and literary essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *Critical Survey*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *Poem*, *Light Journal*, *SNReview*, *Reckoning*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Cerebration*, *Arts & Letters*, *Bengal Lights*, *Chaos*, and elsewhere. His work has been anthologised in a number of books, including *The Book of Dhaka: A City in Short Fiction*. He is a PhD candidate in the Department of English, Assam University, India, and teaches English at Shahjalal University of Science & Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh. His areas of special interest include poetry, short fiction and translation from Bengali into English.