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## An elegy to the hungry girl

Bijit Sinha

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The towering plantain trees distinctly stood amongst the green façade of the passing wilderness. Within it, the concrete structures were invasively stationed amidst the thatched huts of brick and soil. The fields and soiled trenches were filled to the brim with overreaching water from the river and mud alike, leaving nothing out of the realm of ordinary. Everything seemed to belong to their rightful place as it was. With the grazing cows in their astounding numbers to the little girl from the lowborn hut gazing at the speeding motor, one could not piece them as separate from each other. However removed from linear logic, all seemed to come to one conclusion. It was the ordainment of the divine. The receding of the water in the paddy fields had slowly given rise to the middlemost of the patches meant only for treading over, and not prancing around the expanse. For it seemed as though the forbidden patches were off-limits, limited to the frolicking of the ignorant. Such was the onlooker's perception from the carriage of charred coal and air-conditioned heat.

This same momentary perception phased through and through. Maybe the cows dispersed amongst the long shafts of rice crops. But he was still unaware of how to factor in the girl amongst all of these. She was bound to vanish by the time the carriage picked up its pace. Even if her gaze was not directed towards the onlooker, his projection of her was seemingly long enough to distinguish her from the purplish flowers straining out of the mud. And there came the mirage of smoke and painted progress. The swift streaks of red-yellow-blue of the opposite carriage sped through his perception with a thumping velocity. At the place where she stood, now stood a man next to his newly-built, albeit forgettable two-storey. It did not ooze any kind of resonance in the onlooker. The unmarked graves of makeshift wood and rotting lumber nearby barely called out to the owner.

The path that the girl had undertaken has disappeared from his view. As she inched slowly towards the waterlogged fields to escape his scrutiny, he nonetheless deduced that the path she had waded through was already well-built, an anomaly in the entire area. Under the slighted canopy of oblong trees, the illuminated space underneath was inundated with the overflowing water from the hills. The distant green carpeting the cliff had not been able to contain it. And so, she had lost her only refuge. She could have been moving away from that sickly man on his strained cycle, with traces of rusted yellow and uniform green. He was heading over to his home with the sun setting in from afar, ensuring that he didn't encounter the bales of hay wrapped around the electric poles. That could have been a well-deserved but cruel exit for him. Though the onlooker was not able to pinpoint his earthly hut, he wasn't able to smell the reassurances of a hot, frugal meal back home.

The girl definitely didn't fit the bill of a common girl fetching water from the polluted stream. It didn't seem like she had strong ties to that thatched home of hers. Her own roof since she was born. She didn't need to go anywhere else. And yet, as the distance grew even farther between her and that *wretched hut*, he wondered if it was because she bore the scars of last night. She ambled on towards the river with that crooked stance. She could have bore the lustful silences of that long, past night. She recalled that tainted roof which she had been made to claim as her own, on papers that were now unseen to her. The onlooker believed that it was enough justification for her to seek an unknown place of her own. A spot mired in her loneliness, where she could let go of her domestic restraints clutching at her weary shoulders. As she clung onto the decaying roots nestling through the river bank, she stretched towards the wreath of flowers flowing towards her. That was certainly a luxury she could not have afforded by herself. One might just consider it an apology from the heavens. She had braved through her downtrodden life after all, and that demanded a certain peace

offering from the denizens of the malformed water body. This honorary wreath had translated itself from the possession of the beloved dead to the desperate expectations of a being of the lower cadre. Having accepted the gift with open arms, she was now being subjected to the judgmental gaze of the few fishermen hovering upon their sailing boats of light blue that would gradually vanish in the dying light. The boats seemed to have huddled up together, portraying an image of a conjoined circle, as they debated over what kind of punishment should be meted out to her. Since she had desecrated their dead, she should be confined before they come to a definite consensus. But now, amongst the hazy developments, the onlooker felt he cannot grant a satisfying resolution to her after all. He felt his narrative of the girl was in shambles. Maybe the culprit was the blue-red-yellow mirage for leading him astray. The right order was in disarray. He could not recall the order of events again.

But now, he would not want to undertake the discursive analogies tending to the haves and the have-nots. She was simply detached from her own voice. Even if she screamed out loud, it was never going to reach him. It was the same case with the boy he had seen earlier. The boy was not famished, rather he longed for the packaged food served by the bell-boys. His delirious knocking on the window was considered a distraction, so was his presence. With the blinds drawn over him, his fanciful tastes were rather a part of a monotonous routine the staff and the passengers had partaken in. His frantic knocking had fallen on deaf ears.

But was it the same with the girl he had seen? He could not remember how she looked. She never turned his way. All he could surmise was her standing over the dry patch, and carefully watching the frog wading through the overflowing plains. What was forbidden to her was so easily accessible to the frog. The frog had never shied out of its own mortality. Although this time, they both had a common enemy in the form of a serpentine horror, one chose to observe and the other went forth towards the sea it had always dreamed of.

Meanwhile, the others sharing his cabin remained unperturbed as ever. The guy from the lower berth refused to put his plate down as he asked for another plateful of food. The other remained severely disinterested in the idle chatter, as he reminisced about his father's deeds in the border war. While the onlooker jotted all of them down on a piece of paper he had borrowed, it didn't seem like any of them would take a bullet for anyone else, at least in this age. The father was long dead. He remained forgotten in his own dusty journals kept safely in the creaking musty cupboard.

The knockings on the glass ensued again. Even if he wished to give some of his food to the boy, the thick glass had already ensured it would not happen. That was the ordainment of man's civility. That had stretched out the gap between both the parties. And as for the lower berth person, his claim of being royalty subdued the hierarchy instituted in the carriage berths. Not for one second, would he let one believe he was from the lower ranks, even though he occupied one.

The last image he saw of the girl was her standing crookedly amidst the heavy downpour. He assumed she had been waiting for one hot meal too. Now, it was not even clear to him if she was wearing rags or not. He wished it was the former, for it would make a more powerful story if it were. He wished boarding the carriage would be a dream long lost to her. He wished she would be destitute above all. As it was he who was hungry for the fame and attention, her not being what he claimed her to be would be all for naught if it were otherwise- if she stayed content to herself.

**BIO-NOTE**

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Bijit Sinha is currently working as an English Mentor at The Ardee School, Gurugram, He has previously worked as an Associate Desk Editor at Cambridge University Press India. He has also published his short stories in three anthologies, Hope Reborn, The Other and The Stray Branch: Spring/Summer 2018. His retelling of four Jataka Tales in the form of one-act plays has been acquired by Half Baked Beans for an autumn release in 2020. He is presently working on two manuscripts concerning with mythopoeic fiction. More updates of his works can be found on [www.bijitsinha.com](http://www.bijitsinha.com).

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