

Rabindra Sarobar Series

Neelanjana Banerjee

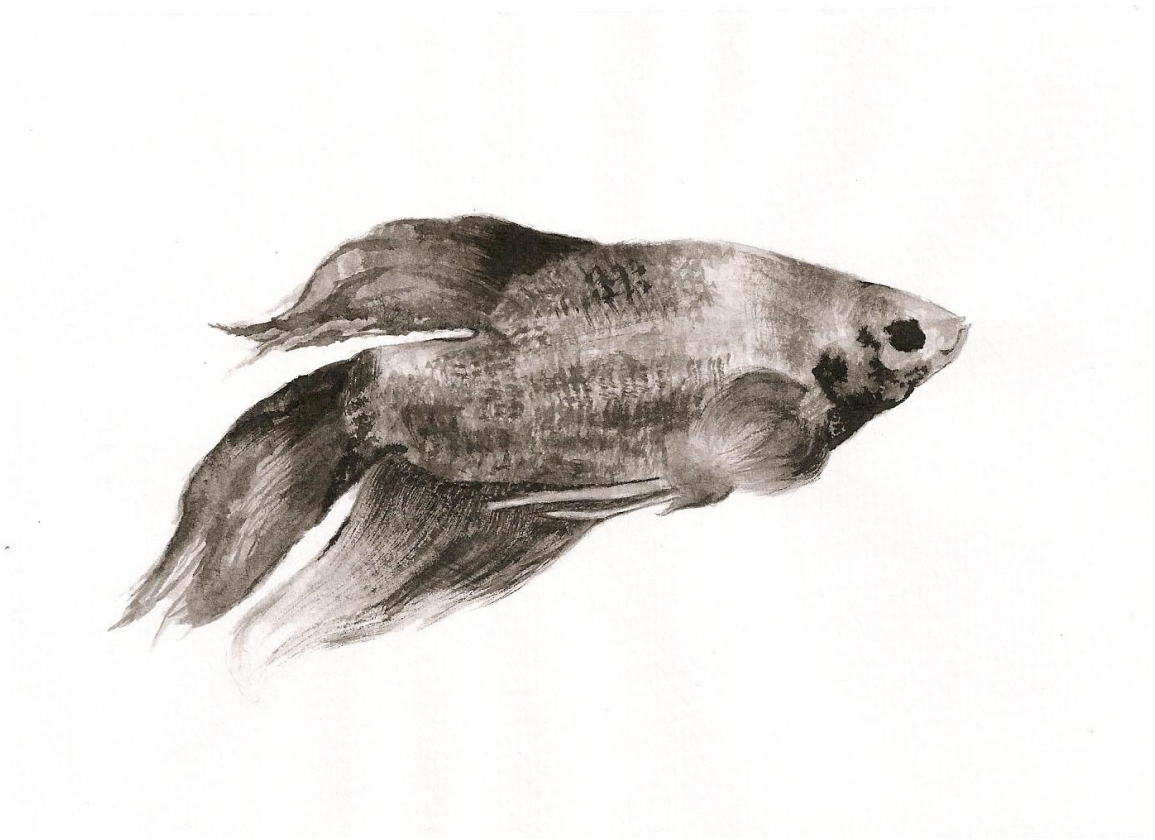
i. [S]he's dead ... wrapped in plastic. (Pilot)

Past the tony Calcutta Rowing Club and behind the Lake Athletic Club, a shadowy, twisting path follows the edge of the Lake. Tangled water lilies crowd the shore near the rusting suspension bridge leading to the green and white mosque. A sign reads: "Prayer Hall, no immoral acts!" Circling around the athletic club—home of both the regional badminton and dart tournaments—a brightly-dressed statue of a god stands beneath a tree, it's head ripped off. All that remains of the rest of his entourage is a strand of tinsel. On one of the lake's other islands, crows perch on each branch of a fallen tree—from the shore they could be mistaken for vultures.

At this time of morning, the sun in my eyes make it seem as though someone is waiting for me at each of the hidden benches, but when I get close I see they are all empty. The sound of the train startles me with its nearness. I nearly step on the pile of crumpled clothes in the bushes. There is a fogginess rising off the water, so that the woman's tangled hair becomes one with the plants that cover her body—one shoulder bare as though the lotus pads have created a luxuriant green sari for her. It's only when I see the whites of her eyes when I begin to cry.

ii. He's got emotional problems. It runs in the family. (Episode 1)

The *Ananda* building is tall and white-washed. In the sunlight, there is something crisp about it like freshly ironed sheets pulled tight. After the sun sets, the yellow sodium lights carve shadows out of its recesses. One night when walking up Raja Basanta Roy Road, I notice two people on one of the balconies. One seems dangerously close to the edge. A few evenings later, I find myself inside after dusk. The floors are uneven, and people keep pointing me in the opposite direction. I had met A. walking her overweight Golden Retriever, Ruffle. Ruffle was wearing a heavy sweater since there was a chill in the air. A. had her hair swept up and there was something lovely about the length of her neck. Inside her apartment, A. makes me a cup of tea and exclaims that no one ever just stops by anymore. The tea is fabulous, I tell her. What amazing tea. A.'s husband seems shifty, but strangely familiar—the shape of his face and his reddish oval eyes like a lover I once had who went blind. A.'s husband was a bachelor until he saved A. from the lonely life of a divorcee last year. Ruffle limps into the room, as does A.'s husband's mother. She sits down, dragging her oxygen tank behind her, and A. loudly explains who I am. The mother's rheumy eyes seem to look right through me. Ruffle howls for biscuits until I concede—A.'s husband looking at the dog like he'd like to push him out the window. There is a murky fish tank behind me and I see the hints of a few Bettas. In another corner there is a partially covered bird cage. Did she bring the bird and fish, too? I ask A.'s husband. No, those were here, he says. The bird was being attacked by a pack of crows one day and he shoed the large black birds away. You saved the bird, too? I ask. He smirks, saying he is not sure he saved the bird, since now it lives in a small cage covered by a dusty piece of cloth. Later, I look at the curve of the tongue of the Goddess Kali's head on the wall as A. sheds silent tears and leans her long neck down onto my shoulder. I've wasted my life, she whispers, as the breeze from the lake flutters the heavy brocade curtains.



iii. Audrey: Do you like coffee? Donna: Yeah, with cream and sugar.
(Episode 2)

I meet a filmmaker for coffee on Sarat Bose Road. She wears thick *kajol* on her eyes and we sit outside where all the young people smoke cigarettes. The filmmaker says that no one ever believes her order of black coffee, that the waiter always returns asking if she is sure she doesn't want milk and sugar. I wonder if coffee and cigarettes are allusions to other drugs, other ideas. "Of all the drugs I've ever done, coffee hits me the hardest," I say, but the joke doesn't go over well here. The filmmaker's mouth moves tightly over her crooked teeth and suddenly I am thinking about a girl I used to make out with. I can taste the soot from the awkward cigarette we smoked after a failed threesome with my boyfriend. As if on cue, the waiter returns and asks if she really wants her coffee black. The next week, I return to the coffee shop and sit inside, watching the way a girl with dark circles under her eyes watches a boy with a motorcycle helmet who flits from table to table. She chain smokes cigarette after cigarette and it makes me want to kiss her, to taste the bitterness on her tongue. After everyone has gone, the boy leaves and the girl follows, silently. She gets on the back of his motorcycle and they ride off in the direction of the lake—her thighs pressed tightly against his.

iv. I'm not afraid of any damn funeral. Afraid? I can hardly wait. Afraid?? I'm gonna turn it upside down! (Episode 3)

When the boatman lets me off at Nimtala, the lights go off near the river. The glow from the fires shudders around everything, making me squint and try to see where I am stepping. I had seen a rat earlier. It's body as long as my forearm. A man chops wood, the echo of his axe rings like a prayer bell. Another man balances a large pile of round logs on his head and carries the wood to the towering pile. He is slow and deliberate. I sit against the ashy steps and I keep trying to look into the flames and separate the fluid shapes of the fire from the static of flesh and bone. Is it her? I imagine the fire spitting fizzled sparks because she is still waterlogged from the lake. Behind me, a large cow munches on hay, then follows a man down the steps, it's hooves clapping in time with the axe. The pyres are built delicately like a game of balance, and the garlands envelop corpses so richly, it is as though I am witnessing a ritual of burning floral effigies. It's so dark, everything around me—wood cutter, cow, corpse—in shadow, silhouetted against the leaping flames. The pyres are lonely. Most of them tended by just one worker. The man stokes the flames of her medium-sized pyre with a long pole. I squint to try and envision the body that burns there. Her breasts melting down into her ribs. Her heart turning into a chemical compound and evaporating into the air. The man, leans on his pole and pulls a phone from the folds in his lungi. The artificial glow on his face outshines the orange firelight. Later, I pay him the cost of burning ten bodies to collect her teeth for me. I want to see if they are crooked like mine.



v. Truman: How'd you lose the arm? Gerard: Car accident. I was on the road from Memphis to someplace. Selling pharmaceuticals. Pretty good job. (Episode 4)

I first see the one-armed man in my circumambulations of the lake. His vigorous exercises catch my attention. He sprints in the overgrown football pitch early in the mornings, when the fog is still tucked close to the lake. He lives in a tarp-roof shack on the grounds of the railway quarters. The pan-wallah I ask says that they let him stay there because he lost his arm in a railway accident. But no one knows for sure. The one-armed man keeps to himself. Some say that he has no tongue either. That would account for the guttural sounds he makes while exercising. He has affixed a metal bar between two close-growing trees near his shack, and does one-handed pull-ups there, keening with the effort of it. A sound that makes the birds fly off with discomfiture.

All in all, his behavior keeps people away, but it draws me to him. I start to come back daily for the sound. Hidden from view on a bench, I crack open cigarette after cigarette—mashing the tobacco and hash together between my fingers. It echoes in my chest, his moans.

Sometimes, at night, I discover that he brings a prostitute home—a fat one with a big mole on her forehead like an off-center bindi. He makes similar sounds like when he does his pull-ups: loud, grunting howls. One night, when he brings the prostitute home, I sit outside his hut, kneeling in the dirt with my ear against the wall—feeling the vibration of his sounds like a deaf person. I imagine his ghost arm clutching at her back; his ghost fingers jamming into her asshole.

One day, he forgoes his usual routine and I follow his determined gait to the *Lake Gardens* Train Station, where he catches a local to *Ballygunge*. It's not hard to keep him in my sights, even in the jostle of the station. We both board the *Kakdip* train south. Next to me, two little boys pass a mongoose back and forth, bickering about who should hold it. Perhaps he is going to visit family, I think about the one-armed man, who has wedged himself into a small space next to the open door—the sunlight flickering across his angular face. He jumps off at *Dakshin Barasat*, and I hurry to follow him, thinking he'll take a rickshaw van to go visit a sister in the rice paddies, where I won't be able to stay secreted. But instead, he crosses the tracks back to the other side, and takes the arriving train back to *Suryapur*.

There, he paces back and forth, smoking a bidi, which he lights of a burning rope hanging by the chai stall. An older woman is hunched on the ground near where I stand, her thin light-colored sari flounced around

her. She complains bitterly about her daughter-in-law, who she says can't cook and has an acid tongue.

She's ugly, too, the old woman says, we should have sent her back where she came from.

The man with one arm continues to walk his jolted, hitching stride, squinting his eyes in the direction that the train will come. Now the old lady says that the daughter-in-law refuses sex at night, she could hear the struggle on the next mat in their one room house.

I should just go over there and hold her legs open, the old woman cackles.

The train approaches with its whistle and blurred loudspeaker announcements, and the old woman spits a stram of betel nut juice at my feet. The one-armed man is still, his head cocked, waiting. It is as though he is in a trance. Even the old woman looks up at him.

What's wrong with this one? she snickers to her companions.

Just as the train starts moving again, the man reaches down with his one arm and rips off her gold chain and quickly stuffs it in his mouth. It must have been real, the gold soft as butter. Then he runs, his one arm flapping like a chicken wing.

Thief! Thief! The old woman yells, but it is too late, the man jumps onto the moving train with perfect balance as it leaves the station. For a moment, he wavers backwards, as though he is going to fall onto the unforgiving tracks, his good arm grasping, but then he finds the side of the door, and he slips inside. The old woman beats her head and stretches her open, wrinkled palm towards the dwindling train car in the distance.

vi. Maybe that's our trouble, Ed. We never wanna hurt anyone. We never just take what we want. There's a part of me that's beginning to think this is how it is when you get to the end of your life and you don't have anything to show for it. (Episode 5.1)

Found among her things, this list:

Green bench at the lake
behind the tree that looks
like a goddess with her
head chopped off.
The roof
of Happiness at dusk.
I'll walk north through Gariahat and you
walk south. Brush against me
at the belt stall. The alley
behind the Ganesha Mandir, during
Lakshmi Puja. The pond in Behala
where the maidservants bathe during
their menses. Priya Theater, Balcony Seats,
left side, closest to the wall.
It's darkest there.
(the cemetery the cemetery the cemetery)
Kalighat on Tuesdays, when the crowd is
seething. I'll be behind you.
A rickshaw headed away
from the Tollygunge
Metro Station, both of us
in the front seat. My
hand brushes your shoulder
around the driver's
sweat-stained back. Zeeshan Park Circus,
the upstairs room, corner booth. The National
Library, underneath the haunted tree, or
if it is raining, by the card catalog. I'll
be looking up the word: unbearable.
Walk by the house, when I can't
stand it anymore,
don't look up, just let me
see you
in the yellow sodium lights.

vii. Margaret: My husband was a logging man. Cooper: Oh? Margaret: He met the Devil. Fire is the Devil, hiding like a coward in the smoke. Dr. Hayward: It was the day after the wedding, wasn't it, Margaret? Hawk: The wood holds many spirits, doesn't it, Margaret? (Episode 5.2)

Q: Are you telling me she was involved in some kind of ... ritual?

A: Throw a stone and you'll hit a ritual. You don't understand the ceremony of life here. America is made of discarded skin cells that floated across the ocean. Now the indigenous people of your land, they understood. Have you ever been in a sweat lodge? Done Peyote? If you have, then you could maybe begin to understand who she was.

Q. So, there were drugs involved in this ritual?

A: If one can find the divine, even in a body polluted with lust and poison and violence, then, can you comprehend, the power available? These trees that live, their leaves, covered in soot, still turning towards the sun. Still producing the oxygen that you consider polluted, with your black mucus membranes.

Q. You are saying she was involved in drugs?

A. I can smell the drugs you did. They were manufactured in a factory using chemicals that are used to clean floors, remove spots. Have they removed the spots in your brain?

Q. I saw a woman possessed by Mata-ji. Red *kum-kum* powder dribbled up from her gullet, leaked from her hands. She pulled a small handkerchief slowly from her throat, covered in viscous red slime. I watched as she put her hands in the fire. Is this what she used to do?

A. Hokum. Charlatans. Spectacle. You saw nothing. If you don't believe, than what did you see?

Q. Is it true, that if you possessed her when she was possessed, you become immortal?

A. Yes, and afterwards we would melt our hands into the chest of slave laborers and rip out their hearts. KALI MA! SHAKTI DEY! Her womb was the resting place of my shankara stone. You insult with your effrontery. Your time is up. Pay the requested the amount and we'll do the puja. Then be on your way. But first, ask the question that you came to ask.

Q. I don't know.

A. Yes, she looks like you, yes.

viii. Crows (Episode 5.3)

From her journal:

“All day they conspire in the *Neem* Tree. Today, I lay on the bed naked and the crows all jostled to look at me, turning their heads this way and that. I covered myself with the nightdress and threw an old bag of puffed rice down, but they wouldn’t go. They wore me down then, the way you did, always looking until I wanted to see my reflection floating there in your iris. I wanted them to come inside, but there are bars on all the windows, locks on all the doors.”



Illustrations : Susanna Kwan