REVIEW

In my mother's tongue

Bangla anthem "Ami Banglay Gaan Gai" speaks to the complex history of the language.

// BY GULAM MONAWARAH

Listening to "Ami Banglay Gaan Gai," the shy finger-picked notes of the sitar might stand out first. They poke out sadly and nostalgically, drowned out by singer, producer and composer Pratul Mukhopadyay. When I asked my mother for a song that had influenced her, I was surprised she referred me to such a slow and preening melody.

My mother recalls her music taste in the 1990s as very unpatriotic. As a teenager in a then-20 year old nation, Bengali music did not really interest her. NSYNC posed on her bedroom walls. Her CDs were those of Celine Dion and Shania Twain, or the closer Pritam and Lata Mangeshkar of Bollywood. She interpreted Bengali music as too sad, underproduced and heavy on the country-hugging.

"Ami Banglay Gaan Gai" is no exception to that genre. BBC Bangla currently holds the song as the sixth greatest Bengali song of all time. The list itself is overwhelmingly filled with patriotic music of the same fabric. For the non-Bengali speakers, Mukhopadyay's magnum opus is a moving confession to his unwavering and helpless devotion to speaking, thinking and loving in the fraught language. Slow, nostalgic and nodding to the intricacies of Bangla, "Ami Banglay Gaan Gai" represented to many a reclamation of Bengali legitimacy via an exploration of the nation's expression. It is also a retrospective on the sadness of the 1971 war for independence.

The 1971 war was fought over the Bengali ethnic group's right to speak Bangla as an official language. The ensuing genocide of Bengali peoples by the Pakistani government fueled an outpouring of sorrow that infected film, music and literature.

The next generation, which included my mother, found refuge from national mourning within Mukopadhyay's music. "Ami Banglay Gaan Gai" is a masterpiece for how it repackages that sadness in a soft, hammering reclamation of Bangla after a violent war that sowed doubt in that movement.

To a non-Bengali Westerner, the combination of string instruments to back the melody seem standard for "desi" music. Who would guess a sitar would be in a Bengali song? But the song notably lacks a percussive element, like the Indian tabla, to ground the listener. Mukhopadhyay and his strings hence float along in a stream of consciousness.

Throughout my reading, I have had to rely on informal translations of the song, my own fluency and my mother's translations. There are so many nuances and instances of wordplay that are so subtle yet so powerful. Often, they have little to no equivalence in English.

The song begins with a slight switch of words that links the significance of the mother tongue to nationality. The first line, "I sing in Bangla," and the second, "I sing songs of Bangla," leverage "Bangla/Bengali" as a term for a language, an ethnicity, and a geographic entity.

Such switches in language have made it hard to translate, and even harder for non-Bengalis to understand. One rather crude version, and one of the only one's available online, combines the next stanza into "I am in Bangla always."

A more fitting meaning utilizes a noun-verb switch to say, "In my dreams I find Bangla," recalling the sentiment of having to restore or search deep within one's heritage to preserve the language. Another one says: "I Am Myself, I Search For This Bengali Language." My mother agrees that a combination of the two matches Makhopadhyay's inability to untangle his perceived self from his language. "I search for who I have always been in Bangla" (Ami Amar Ami Ke Chiro Din Ei Banglai Khuje Pai). Bangla is so intertwined with the process of translating thought into spoken speech, and Mukhopadhyay illustrates that perfectly.

The rest of the song continues the same way. Each line explores how he does every action, feels every emotion and aims for every aspiration in Bangla.

Perhaps this unapologetic usage of the most complex, fabled Bengali appealed to youth like my mother. Mukhopadhyay intentionally muddles verb conjugations so that two listeners can understand them differently. A non-native may not understand it at all. English, on the other hand, is exclusive to none. The plasticity of the global Western pop bands of the age, with widely appealing branding and vague mixtures of genre, my mother says, were nothing like Mukhopadhyay's intentional targeting. He wanted to create a Bengali-only listener's society. Such an idea must have meant the world to a teenager as old, new and malleable as her nation.

When I asked my mother for a song that shaped her childhood the most, I expected one of the Western boy band songs or run-filled feats of iconic vocalists like Mariah Carey or Whitney Houston, who she had always talked about with me. Instead she reached for this obscure, elderly singer who she never mentioned in two decades. "I would listen to this song a lot, on the TV ads and on the CDs. He made me feel proud to be Bengali," she recalled, "and not in a political way. In my way."

I realized that she fiercely guarded "Ami Banglay Gaan Gai" from those she felt would not understand the Bengali plight. Guarded it in the same way the singer fenced off his tender attachment to Bangla from outsiders. And I, no matter how close I could get to speaking the tongue, could never translate her quite right.

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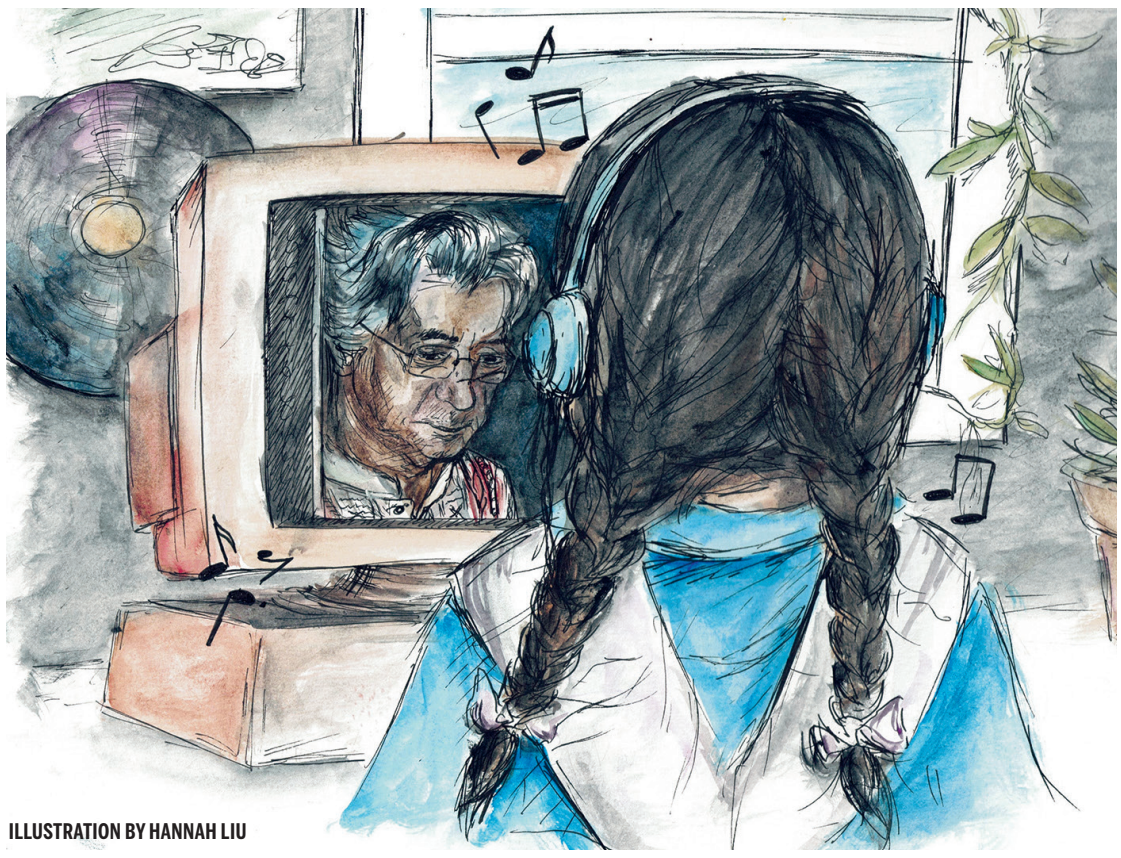


ILLUSTRATION BY HANNAH LIU

CULTURE

Rural Reflection on Urbanity

// BY HANNAH ROLLER

I spent the beginning of my life loving trees and fearing the city. The Berkshires span the western highland region of Massachusetts. Here, this place that I have always called home, the trees morph into forests which blend into mountains which roll into each other, divided at random by rivers or lakes or the occasional town. The rurality of this place has gained appeal each year that I get older. Growing up in the company of nature forces you to examine yourself as part of the broader uncultivated world. The rawness of the seasons, the quiet darkness of the woods, the fire red auburn of the fall foliage, the cold white of the snow, the clarity of the Green River, all telescoping to create a place where one becomes a person as naturally as the seasons change. To grow up in the woods is to become oneself undistracted by preconceived notions of humanity. It is to live as you are.

In a rural setting, there is no guarantee of city convenience. No Instacart or Uber or public transportation or a 24-hour convenience store at the street corner. Instead, my childhood was marked by twenty-minute drives to the local library, leaf piles, snow-blown sled paths, muddy rain boots, fresh corn from the farmstand on the drive home and a nightly harmony of peeper frogs and crickets.

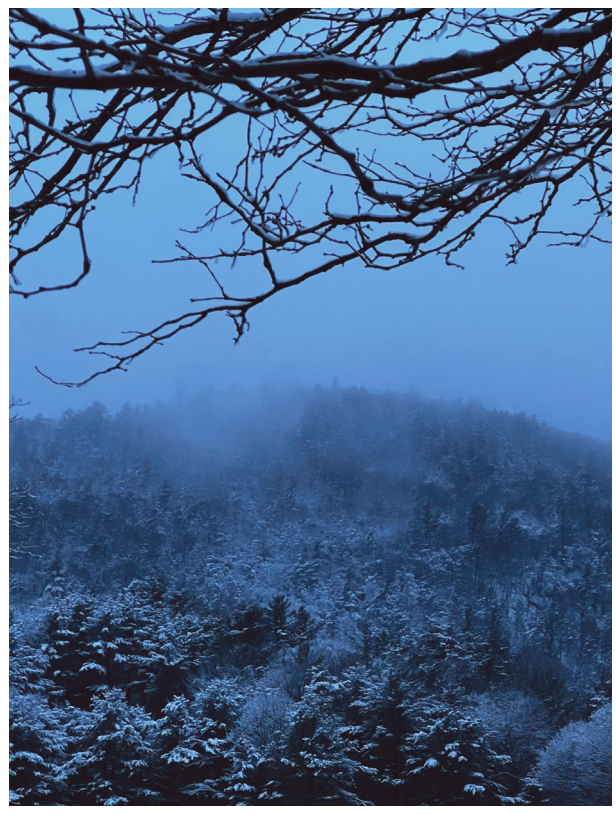
Being a kid in a rural area was challenging. I was completely at the mercy of my mother and her willingness to drive me twenty, thirty, forty minutes to see a friend or to the movies or out to dinner for a first date. My independence was limited by the geographical distance, and my town was tiny, so small that there wasn't a single traffic light. But then I got my car keys.

The last two years I spent at home were soaked in independence. Hours spent in the car blaring music, late night drives, bonfires deep in the woods, freezing hands filling the gas tank, picking friends up, dropping them off, and hour-long conversations in driveways with the engine off. Being able to drive was revolutionary. The time spent in the car, staring out at the mountains and the trees and the rivers, made me appreciate it more. And the final rotation of the seasons leading up to my leaving for college really made me take it in. I love living in the woods, I loved that my school was surrounded on both sides by a range of mountains, I love the foliage and the snow and the animals and the sunsets and the raw aliveness of it all. And for that reason I didn't want the city. It was the one thing about Yale that made me hesitate.

To me, home has always felt serene and simple and rhythmic and natural. Cities, in comparison, always felt messy, overcrowded, overpolluted, laced with desperation, depression, and intensity. New Haven, while a comparably small city to the hometowns of other students, feels huge. On campus there is no open air and no complete silence. There is a constant rush and flow of people, events, cars, scooters, voices, emotions, work and bikes. You don't ever really hear birds here. I walk everywhere. The squirrels are weird, they're unfazed by people. The nature is squished between buildings instead of the other way around. Businesses stay open past 10pm. And you don't hear frogs and crickets at night, you hear car tires and music and laughter.

Three weeks ago I was standing at the intersection of Trumbull and Prospect, the light had just turned red and the crosswalk indicator white and there was the blur of people and the hum of waiting engines and among it the thrum of lives diverging and intersecting. A moment of collectively heading the same, the opposite, the tangent direction. It brought me back to the essay I was working on for a class, centered on the Ancient Confucian Analects. In Analect 4.1 Confucius states "It is beautiful to live amidst humanity. To choose a dwelling place destitute of humanity is hardly wise."

That segment, when I had initially read it, made me pause. I have spent the majority of the past few years with the stubborn belief that it is far more beautiful to live in nature, away from the complicated convoluted mess of desire and convenience and ease. The rurality of the Berkshires — the peace, air, trees, and calm — always felt like a more accurate representation of what life is, what it is meant to be. But New Haven has led me to realize that the city also holds a true, albeit different, version of life. The city holds humanity in all its riches, poverty, emptiness and depth.



I won't stop loving trees, but I have stopped fearing the city. As rurality reminds us of the responsibility we have to the Earth, urbanity reminds us of the responsibility we must and necessarily do have to each other. The city is now one of the things I love most about Yale.

I find myself feeling as though I have found home in both of the polar opposites.

I went back to the woods over break. I don't know if this is universal, but the first time coming home made the past months at Yale feel like an illusion, a hazy summer camp-like day dream. Weirdly, the Berkshires also felt slightly foreign. Nights quiet and sleepy, travel long and mundane, the sky open and empty. Home felt strangely solitary, since at school we are constantly witnessed by each other. You are rarely alone, rarely with yourself.

At home it felt like it was just the woods and me. I missed that feeling, but I also started to miss being witnessed. And while I have loved being submerged in the apple orchard, the hikes, and the long winding roads, I found myself missing New Haven itself. It seems I now hold the city, right there along with the trees.

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