

Fragments of an Account of a Journey to the Lost Plague of Amarpur

In a city shaped like the endlessly polygonal pseudopodia of the first amoebic sea life, a city called Amarpur, a city by the Great Southern Sea, was found the trajectory of a history so mazy with its eternal cycles of repetition and internal logics of replacements¹, that its readers at the city's university emerged blind during the course of their ceaseless education. Amarpur was a city of libraries; little else was engaged in. Students, teachers, enthusiasts and tramps from all over the world docked at the port of Amarpur to fill black holes in their lands' respective disciplines with the epistemic clues found in these libraries.

Yet centuries ago, before it became the knowledge capital of the world, Amarpur had itself been a black hole. It held in its own membrane a plague that, many scholars now deduce, must have been a dream – a dream that struck the chosen ones, one after another like an epidemic. It was unclear if the dream transformed the waking state of its victims, or if the dreamers permanently entered the dream. Before the dream had come, the people of the North had been warned. One day all the drains, sidewalks, broken trees, bus stands, tram stands, and all possible places hidden from the sun had opened out in a wild frenzy of mosquitoes. They had rushed out filling the street with a sense of unbroken freedom, entering through windows, and up from the drains into bathrooms. In some cases, they had even been found splaying out of transistors. There were mosquitoes in dreams and daydreams and fantasies. Some people had seen mosquitoes travel out of sacred books, leaving

¹ For instance, the Bodo generation's habits were transferred to the Kapi generation and vice versa in a cycle of five hundred and one years. There was no record of any inter-marriage between the Bodos and Kapis.

behind empty pages. The river was full of mosquito eggs, and the sky began to reflect a mottled surface. They fed on everything, even thought.

But the next morning when the sun had been clean and bright against the blue sky, the people had brushed off the happenings of the previous day simply as aestival hallucinations. The streets had never really been free of mosquitoes, they thought. Maybe the heat had blurred their vision.

Their own minds exploited the lie they gave to themselves.²

In that span of Amarpur's history Ms J. lived in a ruined apartment block, alone. For years the city had been shrinking like a blighted orange, crumbling from the North to the South in a slow cascade. To flee the Plague many families had escaped by the sea to other lands and nothing was ever heard of them again. Yet many had sojourned up North and vanished into the interior. The habitual disappearance of family members, friends, pets and lovers wore heavily upon the inhabitants like unfinished conversations, a mango seed in the foregut.

Ms J. had longed for the Plague for years. Sometimes she wished it to seep into her home through the walls and engulf her. She had lost her mother and her dog to it. Her father had boarded the last ship leaving no notice or goodbye. J. had heard from a neighbour that on the night her mother sleepwalked out of home, she went from house to house asking for a bookstore owned by a

² The description of the Plague and the years preceding it is found in the cipher manuscript of Ms J. Many versions of the Plague may be deciphered from the same manuscript. Ms J. was perhaps the only one to return from the Plague and leave an account.

spider. Her dog had made her aware of his departure by digging his own grave behind the apartment and leaving it empty.

Ms J. worked in a post office that had long become defunct. The task of the authorities had sometime ago shifted from regulating the flow of letters, telegrams, parcels and money-orders to cataloguing the addresses of the Amarpuris who lived and the addresses of those who had disappeared, either by the Plague or by the sea. Over the years this enterprise had widened to the writing of social histories as far back into the past as possible. By this mechanism each Amarpuri was able to ascertain an imagined genealogy that originated in the city, of which each one of them was the end. The post office later expanded to various departments that were devoted to studying these social histories. Ms J. belonged to the department that attributed numerical language to this methodical foray into the city's past. This department conceived a system by which each city dweller would be represented by an equation that combined all the externally manifest details of his present life, his ancestry, including the supposed time of his death. However, these equations had to be modified every day and required punctilious work.

The paperwork on her table was an endless sifting world. There was no treasure, no opium. Only numbers, dancing and morphing into more numbers. Numbers invaded her dreams and coaxed her to join their lot. The trouble was that she handled a more specific ambiguity than the other officials in the post office. She was in charge of developing that cluster of human equations whose genealogy had not been discovered yet, and for those who were still alive. Her equations were bound to grow upward and downward simultaneously, and she desperately wished for a *constant* that would stabilize her system. It was not in their portion, to be inaccurate, for the officials at the post office believed that this alone was the truth they could live by till the Plague would finally infest their

streets. Even Ms J. knew that the Amarpuris longed for their own stories to sweeten the drug of the Plague. She worked in a single-windowed room, bloating with brown seepage walls. From the outside, her window was a moving square on a series of square windows on a red brick background cracked by roots and leaves. A parasol of yellow flowers growing from the walls filtered the sunlight falling into her room.

Mr S.³ worked in the Department of Plague Reconstruction. He recorded the accounts of the Plague in the East 24 Parganas of Amarpur. No one in the city could recount the actual Plague. Those who were lost to it never returned to enlighten their successors. And yet the Plague was imagined by all. The drunks in the bars believed that further North, the streets were filled with drunken men and women at night and there was hardly a place to walk. Only an endless field of bodies arranged themselves in variegated postures. They would gather round to look at the moving constellations and swear dreamily at the sky. The children believed that the Plague manufactured all their dreams and relayed them individually to their very bed. The priests at the temples believed that the city existed only for the Plague. When the city would have been ravaged of all its inhabitants, the Plague would itself automatically wane, but none of the present Amarpuris would be able to see this. According to them, each Amarpuri would one day leave for the Plague and meet it halfway through their journey. And then, there were the stories handed down from previous generations. It did not matter if these conjectures could be affirmed. Mr S. wandered from door to door, collecting imaginary data to fill the binders at the Department of Plague Reconstruction.

³ From her notes, it appears that one such man was probably the only acquaintance she had in the post office itself. The correspondence between the various departments and its subsequent authorities was carried out by the issue of circulars. The findings of each department were sent to the Department of Publication and openly sold to the public.

Mr S. and Ms J. met periodically at a bar and discussed affairs, the problems of research, the impossibility of dissolving the fallacy of perspective in any account, the improbability of finding a constant. One June afternoon, while the blistering sun shone on tar as seen through the bar window, Mr S., as usual, moaned to J. that his job would be endless till death.

“People when encouraged will invent more and more accounts of the Plague, which can never be verified. I am doomed to a life of cumulative menial documentation. Do they inwardly expect me some day to go to the Plague and find out for myself what it’s like? In fact sometimes I get the feeling the department sends agents armed with theories to combat the Plague from time to time.”

Ms J. locked her eyebrows like a pensive bird and snapped her beak at him.⁴

“You mean Secret Intelligence?”

“But what’s the use,” Mr S. sneered. “None of them returns. If they did, the Department of Intelligence would long before have replaced the Department of Plague Reconstruction. It is still underground, and hasn’t drawn enough support yet.”

“Wonder why they do not return...”

“It is possible that they have returned and we just do not know. Or that *they* do not know.”

“You mean they’re in hiding? Is it possible to find a returned one?”

Mr S. shrugged his shoulders. If answers had abounded, questions would not have been asked. They continued the course of their meals silently and parted for the strange isolation of their own apartments. While Ms J. returned home that evening, she found a russet key sieving through a

⁴ It is here that Ms J. mentions in her account what she thought Mr. S. thought of her appearance. She must have looked like a cankerous cotton plant to him, or a cat with boneskin. How on earth had he reconciled her large feet and tiny hands?

rain puddle glinting in the streetlight. She picked it up and put it into her pocket.⁵ Her mind was inchoate with the possibility of a returned Amarpuri. She saw nothing but the skeleton of such an equation building in her head. There was surely a factor that the Numerical Department had comfortably evaded for all those years. And Ms J. had by now assured herself that the equations her department realized were mere half-dreams if they could only be completed on the subject's death. The equations had no predictive or representative value. Only like immediate graves they distilled themselves at the final disappearance of the subject and served as epitaphs in boneless cemeteries.

As she neared her apartment block, something absented itself from her consciousness. She ran up the stairs, each step fastening itself so acutely for a moment, that if she tried hard to retrieve their number later from memory, she would incidentally repeat the past. As she opened her door, she felt she neared the lost thought.

That was it. She had to meet a returned one, man, woman or animal. The sense of revelation had blinded her for a moment. It was the Plague itself that was the constant she sought. The Plague

⁵ Here Ms J. deviates and gives us an account of a story she had heard from her father. A fisherman once found a key on a beach. Accustomed to living under the sky on his boat or sometimes in a friend's shack, he decided to look for the lock that the key would open. This lock could open a house, a palace or treasure hidden in any corner of the world, he thought. And then he set off on a journey, moving from house to house, city to city, country to country, sea to sea, trying his key in all possible locks, on abandoned kiosks in street corners, banks, houses, trunks on railway stations, shops and automobiles. Yet he had never succeeded in opening any lock with that key. When at his last breath, he hurled the key into a river and abandoned it forever. It is then that he entered a house with no door, high ceilings and arabesques of corridors, asking for food and shelter for a night. The lady of the house helped him recover and fell in love with him. And he stayed with her till the end. The moral of the story being that the key, though it helped in elimination, was itself supposed to be eliminated in order to serve its end. Perhaps Ms J. used the key she found as a talisman.

had been there before the birth of the present Amarpuris and would in all probability exceed their total lifespans. It was the only point that was at this moment tied to the city's history and future.

The next day, without informing the post office, she set out on her journey alone. She decided to walk all the streets of Amarpur and visit all the shops, fairs, cemeteries, opium dens, bars, public gardens, bus stations, tram lines and temples. She would not miss any location.⁶

For months she found no sign. If she did not find a returned one, she would find the Plague itself. Rumours abounded among the burghers. Some said that they had – perhaps, or even certainly – heard of a returned one in a blurred Friday meeting or a stray gathering, and directed her to more reliable authorities. She shuttled from aisle to aisle like a lost angel and tried to make the pieces fit every night.

One such day the owner of the hardware shop on Sapt St. told her about the mad professor who lived in Crown View Hotel. She wasn't elated yet. He said she just had to skip two lanes to the right, enter the third and look for the building behind a large yellow bookshop. Ms J. followed his instructions to the letter and found only a lane-ful of white gravel lining the backside of a mill. She asked the watchman at its rear gate if he knew about Crown View Hotel. He said he had surely heard about it, but it was nowhere here, but there round on the east end of Sapt St., where she must enter the third lane to the left walking from the northern end. Reaching there, she found an ageing garbage dump airing its surroundings. The ragpicker cackled when she asked him for directions to the Crown View Hotel. He asked her to find it in the mirror of the road she was standing on.

⁶ Ms J. has left an account of the months of searching – detailed descriptions of the architecture of streets, names of shops, the angles of streetlights, the number of cigarette shops per minute on a given radius, the differences in the dialects of the people, as she peregrinated from locality to locality on her ceaseless *dérive*.

She thought Sapt St. was surely a network of routes emerging from a point, each forking into multiple bystreets, crossroads and arteries. She would never reach Crown View if she persisted with directions given by strangers. She had to seek it from the centre outward. She was also convinced that the centre of the circular expanse of Sapt St. would not have been marked. It was only essential to construct a mental map. From then on, she rambled freely and asked all passers-by the way to Crown View. With the route that each gave her from the exact place where she stood, she tirelessly reconstructed all the routes possible from every point on the street to the hotel. She would then be able to outline her own route from the reconstructed centre to the hotel itself. But it appeared to her that the hotel was distant and unapproachable, or that it mysteriously fell on the blind spot at every search, or that it could not be sought.

Ms J. had lost all track of time. She looked at birds hanging by the trapeze of electric lines, poles and window sills and imagined their speech, their song. Betrayed by the elusiveness of the perfect rendezvous, she wandered to the centre of Sapt St. To follow the mental map, she walked lulled with closed eyes.

At what she thought was the centre according to her mental map, she found herself amazed in a long hall packed with different kinds of wares. It was not like some medieval fair preening its feathers under the desert moon beyond Anatolia. At the entrance it looked like an old congregation hall, with high ceilings from which were suspended many tiny-bladed fans. The ventilation was minimal and the windows with broken panes slashed the gulmohar trees shivering in the afternoon draft. Ms J. walked through the maze of stalls, through different zones of cotton, synthetic, perfumed flesh. At the inner channel, the hall morphed itself into an oblong mirror, the floor, the

ceiling and the wares coated with mercurial beams.⁷ Layered with a sense of mirrors, the rumble of voices in the hall silenced her. Like in a damp paddy field of night where frogs croaked in seasonal excitement, different strains of voices floated in from all sides and settled in her. As she stood listening, the different pitches merged into a single euphoric summit and broke back again to their distinct lines. If they were talking in unison, their language was surely opaque, and yet the sense travelled to her mind.

For some time the hall had seemed endless, and raw with stalls of manuscripts of ancient African songs, Abyssinian wind instruments, models of extinct animals and animals to come, painters painting models inside circular, polygonal mirrors with molten pieces of the white whale's jawbone. There were entrances to catacombs filled with wild monkeys imprisoned with individual typewriters. Stalks of stairs led to overhead cubicles from which skilled weavers wove collectively in mercurial fibre, rhythmic images of the movement observed below.

⁷ Here Ms J. expounds a vision of the universe where every object has a mirror surface. "All matter to its most primordial particle was a mirror. Some objects were transparent. When we looked up at the sky, we saw the universe of the ocean mingle with stars, and at sea, planets and comets hurtled through the well of water. It was as if this was the plan that is the basis of the parallel mirrors in dressing rooms. Narcissus would have gone blind. And all mankind lived in dreams and visions. What was true was the perfect illusion in the mind refracted endlessly by the wild mirror sheen of the outside. In the mind one sang, one wrote, one played, swam. And more often than not, the trajectory of the light from the image had already passed through the looking glass of someone else's mind, or more minds, leaving us with an infinitely reduced and refined truth. I gasped as I sought the end of this long, strange galaxy. Hurtling down a vacuum of darkness, I arrived at a vision of the universe, in the farthest point in space, a sort of yellow spot in the mind's eye, where a situation of perfect focus is achieved. I imagined all angles and all reflections and all objects, real and conceptual reeling in this dark pool of space."

Ms J. ran along the hall like an iguana fleeing its first image. As she ran she heard millions of songs, bird calls, hyena laughter, the trumpet of printing presses, the roar of revolutions, the odour of fish markets, elephant graveyards, fields and fields of decaying oranges, and poppy blasts. Then, as if from a moment underwater, when suddenly aware of the backlog of breath from the lungs the body pines for the surface, she emerged out of the hall and swallowed the sky. She found herself in a huge cemetery lined with empty graves. She found her own grave, and her human equation complete on it. At the west end, beside the river Aeravat, was a blind old man with scrawny limbs searching a song with a dafli. There were hoboes, urchins, grave-diggers, resting day-labourers beside him gambling away the repose of afternoon sun. She sat alongside them and listened to the old man's song. Rumour was that this was the only man who had returned from the Plague, but it had eaten his mind. They said that he heard bats gnawing through his rib cage and felt earthworms curling his cochlear noose. He sang without food or rest and believed that the graves would hoard his songs and return them to him after his death. Ms J. fell blissfully into his fluid iron voice. There were harmonies swimming out of his palate. He had truly entered the infinities of tones between each of the twelve musical notes and lapsed into them.

Ms J. could hardly believe that she had, then, finally witnessed a returned one. With all the existing routes of Sapt St. that led to Crown view Hotel drawn in her head, she had failed to find it. She opened her mouth to ask the old man for the way to the North Plague, but she instead began to sing with him. Had she by chance entered the infinities between moments that would take infinite infinities to pass?⁸

⁸ From here onward Ms J.'s manuscript poses more problems than before. Her script previously embodied with the sequencing and repetition of any language, changes to drawings made from dots. Different from George Seurat's pointillism, the dots are placed at distances with connecting lines. For the

Another interpretation of Ms J.'s manuscript entirely excludes the journey to the Plague. According to it, Ms J., instead of embarking on a search for the returned one, had returned to her apartment block and enclosed herself there. She spent her days ascending and descending the spiral vertebra of stairs in her block. Sometimes they seemed endless and evaporated as she mentally travelled. But soon she would rein in her intractable mind and hinge it on to the stairs.

...She began to count the steps as she descended. One two three four five and the greater her certainty with respect to the ordinal numbers of the stairs, the nearer appeared the last step, surpassing a huge blur of imperceptible spiralling stairs. This was exciting. Finally those numbers were playing a game with her. Could she move faster if she moved in the sequence of geometric progressions? Could she by one four sixteen two hundred fifty six sixty five thousand five hundred thirty six shuttle herself out of this process?

Endless possibilities rushed to her brain and divided her into various thinking zones. She would defy the order of numbers, the order of letters, the order of memory. Ms J. was a pin binding all substantial orders, and all along, her existence had lain only in as much as she had conceded to labour within a pre-ordained role.

most part the figures are abstract and do not revert to the cipher language she begins with. The manuscript ends with sheaves of verbal farragoes.

“I invent a new order of alphabet. AZYBXCDWEFVGHUIJKTSLRMNQOP⁹. I emerge from the old, but I will be new at every movement in thought. I will be new.”

“I will be new.”

The stairs were not there any more. Neither were the numbers, nor her alphabet. They forsook her as she emerged defiant. She was alone, contemplating the edge of that new room, unable to see herself, floating like a point that successively halved itself. So she rushed back to memory, in sequence, to recover the image of her existence – the new alphabet, geometric progression, numbers, stairs. Stairs. Stairs. Stairs. One two three four....

According to this interpretation, the entire manuscript is a repetition of the same narration, in the different cycles of her replaced vocabulary. Nowhere is a mention of a search for the returned one.

⁹ The alphabet Ms J. invented was based on the order 1221 2112 1121 2122, which could be imposed on any sequence of signs, by which 1 represented the ascending order of the sequence and 2 its corresponding descending order. Hence the prior end of any sequence occurred now in the beginning itself (for instance, Z is the second letter of her alphabet) and its prior centre emerged toward the end. The order could obviously be inverted, by which 2 stood for the ascending and 1 for the descending. By these conceptions she imagined a new infinitely replaceable vocabulary, for instance the word “dove” in our minds, would become “bfnx”, by the first possibility of this new alphabet. In the mind of the inventor, the new language and its emergent vocabulary intuitively replaced the old and the process of communication changed only in the relation of sounds to words.

Scholars now presume that whatever the truth of Ms J.'s story, her account displays an essential antinomy in the concept of the Plague itself. The Plague could be perceived or imagined only as an external endemic phenomenon by those who had not yet been subjected to it. Yet it did not exist in space. It was purely internal. The connection of the end of the Plague to Amarpur's illustrious history since then is only slant. When the descendants of the Amarpuris who had escaped by sea returned, the coastal city was a land of echoes. They recreated Amarpur again, in a historic hour of twenty-two years. The vast intelligence of the Amarpuris and their ceaseless libraries suggest a further irresolution. The later Amarpuris had perhaps learnt to tune into the Plague and use it to enable their survival. The Plague had probably continued.
