

Below is a hybrid piece consisting of various genres such as creative non-fiction (CNF), essay, diary entry, poetry, and oil painting. This is an attempt to make sense of the three weeks from mid-July to 5 August (or 36 July as it came to be known) 2024.

Reliving Bangladesh July 2024 Revolution: A Collage

Razia Sultana Khan¹

Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB)

“I write. I write so that no one will forget. I write so that the dead may speak.”
— *Jean Hatzfeld*, Rwandan genocide journalist and author

By the first week of July 2024, Bangladesh’s public universities had come to a standstill. Faculty members went on strike in response to a proposed pension reform that would introduce a defined-contribution scheme and require salary deductions for the first time. Their walkout forced the closure of Dhaka University (DU) and soon after, all other public universities. At the same time, students left their classrooms to protest a High Court decision reinstating a thirty-percent civil-service quota for the descendants of *muktijoddha*, the freedom fighters of the 1971 Liberation War.

The quota system had long included reservations for women, minorities, and persons with disabilities. Alongside these, the *muktijoddha* quota had been expanded in 2018 to include the freedom fighters’ grandchildren. Students questioned why such a large quota should remain in place more than fifty years after independence and argued that it no longer served its original purpose. Although the government responded by abolishing the quota entirely, the High Court’s later order to reinstate it, reignited nationwide protests. Even after the government appealed the ruling and the Supreme Court issued a temporary stay, the demonstrations continued.

What made July 2024 distinct from earlier student movements was the intensity and immediacy of its images. The protesters were not experienced agents or organisers of political parties; they were young people of the digital age

¹ **Razia Sultana Khan** is Advisor and Professor of English at Independent University, Bangladesh. She earned her MA in Linguistics from the University of York (UK) and her PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (USA). Her stories have appeared in *Best New American Voices* (2008), *The Best Asian Short Stories* (2019), and other publications. She is the author of *Palki and Other Tales of Seduction* (2012) and has co-edited three books. She is a passionate oil painter, and her first solo art exhibition was held in Jainal Gallery, Dhaka, in 2020. Email: rsultana@iub.edu.bd

whose tools were smartphones, social media, and quick, hybrid forms of communication. The movement ran in two parallel forms: physically on the streets and virtually, online. Both forms helped to gain public understanding and support.

For many, the Quota Andolon (or the movement against the quota system) became a collage of unforgettable scenes: an unarmed student baring his breast to bullets; a young girl challenging an army truck; a squad of police officers struggling with one lone young woman over a traumatised young male student; a limp figure thrown out of a military vehicle landing in a mangled lifeless heap; the image of a smiling boy offering water (*pani lagbe?pani?*) to protesters, and the same boy lying in a pool of his own blood; a rickshaw driver racing through an empty street with a body lying on the footrest, the head swaying from side to side in tune with the movement of the rickshaw; etc. These youngsters were younger than my own children, and often younger than university-going students. These images kept haunting me, appearing whenever I closed my eyes and forcing me to stay awake at night, simply to hold the images at bay.

The courage shown by these young protesters stands in clear continuity with earlier moments of national resistance – those who defended the Bangla language in 1952 and the ordinary citizens who fought in 1971 to liberate their land. In July 2024, a new generation stepped into that lineage. They did not always have political expertise, but they had a purpose, determination, and moral clarity.

Two competing versions of events emerged. The government attempted to frame the protests in its own terms, while the protesters and the broader *aam janata* (the public) offered a different narrative. The government used the official media, newspapers, and television. The young demonstrators used handmade posters, chants through megaphones, livestreams, and the simple force of their physical presence on the streets. They used all forms of music, and the protest songs and poems of Partition and the Liberation war of '71 blended with rap songs by Shezan and Shayaan.

To tell the story of July 2024 is to acknowledge these voices and images, and to recognise the ways in which they ignited people's patriotism and shaped the movement.

Diary Entry: 30 June – 15 July

Who knew July was going to be such a historical but disruptive and horrendous month? Got the flu and missed classes on Tuesday 9 July. During this time I was off television and didn't check social media posts. This is when the Quota Andolon gathered momentum.

Diary Entry: Tuesday 16 July

The students have called for boycott and andolon but having missed classes last Tuesday, I decide to risk it and go to Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) to take a physical class. There isn't a single student in the classroom. On checking my mail I see that they have asked for on-line classes. They know very well that I prefer a physical class. I spend about 40 minutes in an empty classroom before leaving for home.

Under the circumstances I am grateful to get home in one piece. I switch on the news channel as I change and relax. The first image that greets me is a young man with his arms stretched out, a short stick in his right hand, spreadeagled. Suddenly his body jerks. He looks down, surprised. Then his body jerks a second time. The expression on his face doesn't change nor do his arms drop, but his knees buckle and slowly, almost in slow motion, he starts tottering like a tower imploding into itself, then crumbles to the ground. Figures untangle themselves from the background and try to hold him up, but his body goes limp. The camera moves to a phalanx of police with their guns aimed in his direction. I realise a policeman, or two, or all of them have shot an unarmed young man in the street in plain view of everyone.

I stand petrified, watching the footage play over and over again.

I am reminded of a short story I teach in my creative writing class. It is called "Bullet in the Brain" by Tobias Wolff. I use the story to show how a writer can slow down the passage of time. After all, time is relative. In the passage I quote below, Wolff takes the reader through the movement of the bullet, step by step, as it enters the main character's skull, moves through his brain and exits.

The bullet smashed Anders' skull and ploughed through his brain and exited behind his right ear, scattering shards of bone into the cerebral cortex, the corpus callosum, back toward the basal ganglia, and down into the thalamus.... After striking the cranium the bullet was moving at 900 feet per second, a pathetically sluggish, glacial pace compared to the synaptic lighting that flashed around it. Once in the brain, that is, the bullet came under the mediation of brain time, which gave Anders plenty of leisure to contemplate the scene that, in a phrase he would have abhorred, "passed before his eyes." Wolff 263

Diary Entry: Wednesday 17 July

I have been trying to get my paper work ready for a visit to Japan with a friend. On 17 July, I have an interview at the Japanese Embassy in Dhaka for my visa but there is no further news from the embassy. I am not prepared to leave the country at this point. History is unfolding. I feel I need to be here. Also, aren't I

flirting with fate in trying to plan so much for the future when the present is so unsettled?

Rumour went viral that five IUB students had been killed. Lots of messages being passed on the Internet in chat groups about the state of the students. The only confirmation is that many students with rubber bullet wounds had sought refuge at the university campus. Both IUB and North South University (NSU) were letting students in. The students needed medical aid. Some had to be taken to Evercare Hospital.

Morzina, my domestic helper, came late. She said she'd been assaulted by the police on her way home yesterday. They had lathi-charged to bring pedestrians in line. I appeased my guilt by giving her rickshaw money so she wouldn't have to walk home.

Morzina's husband rang at 1:00 pm (two hours after she had left my house) to say she had not turned up home. After that I kept ringing her – she wasn't picking up – and her husband every 30 minutes, consumed by guilt. She was unaccounted for because she had left the safety of her home to come and help me. She was missing for about four hours before she was rescued by a policeman known to her husband. She said she and many other pedestrians were not allowed to pass a certain intersection in Puran Bazar and got beaten up in the process.

The government declared curfew on Friday 19 July from 6 pm in the evening till 10:00 am Saturday 20 July. Then curfew again till the next day. The Internet was cut off from Friday night onwards. Housebound. Phone line Erratic. Went to the rooftop to get a breath of fresh air and saw smoke bellowing from the Banani area.

Diary Entry: Thursday 18 July

All hell broke loose. Saw on YouTube students being pelted with rubber pellets. News started filtering in. Hundreds of students being taken into police custody. The pelting and beating continued. By this time the border guards had been called in. Obviously, there wasn't enough police. Word spread that the police and army had been given orders to "shoot to kill." The PM was supposed to go to Spain for some meeting or had she escaped?

Many posts are being shared of students with rubber pellet wounds who need medical attention. Posts with images of bare backs dotted all over, and X-rays sprinkled with similar dots, like a night sky with clusters of stars, are going viral. There are rumours of the government's use of shotgun pellets. These are also called "birdshot" or "lead pellets" and are projectiles that burst into many pieces when they enter the body.

Diary Entry: Saturday 20 July

Housebound, no net, erratic phone connection. Imran got through to me and we managed to talk, but just for 30 seconds. Normally he doesn't call more than twice a week, but now, he calls me up twice a day.

Horrendous stories going around of bodies lying on the streets. The English newspaper *The Daily Star* said 219 dead in one day. Called a friend whose husband is a doctor at a renowned hospital. She told me the major hospitals had been instructed not to take in or treat people with rubber pellet wounds. Also found out that IUB and other universities had been instructed not to talk about the number of students killed. Bangladesh Television (BTV) is our only source of information and they are spewing out a lot of bullshit. The only "reliable" information is from Al Jazeera and BBC. Unsurprisingly, according to the Information Minister, Al Jazeera and BBC are distorting information. Had an invitation for dinner at the Regency Hotel but it was cancelled. Another wedding invitation... also cancelled. Not sorry at all, this is not the time to be partying.

Diary Entry: Sunday 21 July

Sunday and Monday were supposed to be "public holidays," but curfew has been extended indefinitely. The armed forces have been brought out. PM didn't go to Spain. The High Court met to consider the students' quota request. They have agreed to 95% for deserving students, 5% for Freedom Fighters, 1% for gender/Trans, 1% for disabled/challenged people. Isolated pockets of "andolon" going on. Couldn't go to the Japanese Embassy interview. Don't even know if it took place. Not interested to leave my homeland at this stage. Have an instinctive pull that tells me my place is here.

Diary Entry: Monday 22 July

It rained last night so the city was a little cooler. Morzina didn't turn up for the 3rd consecutive day. Don't really believe the story about her being beaten up. She may have been harassed; change that to a good chance that she was harassed, but beaten up? So far they've only beaten up students. No attempt at irony here!

Imran called up again this morning telling me to stock up on drinking water and dry food. Sound advice but I have a water refining thingy and then I boil my water and have my meals with Maina. Anyway, didn't want to totally disregard his advice, so sent Shamsu, the Concierge at reception, to get 2 large loaves of bread, a dozen eggs, and a packet of sugar, two packets of liquid milk, 2 kilos of mangos, and a dozen bananas. I didn't expect him to get all the items since the rumours had it that there was already a shortage of eggs and milk. Surprisingly he was back in 30 minutes with all the items. My conclusion is that

at least in Gulshan 2 there is a good supply of food. What about the rest of the city? Should I call up my close relatives to see if they had enough food? But what if they said, no. The logistics of trying to get food to them was difficult, to say the least. I'm sure they'll manage. I hope they manage....

Our only source of news now is *The Daily Star* and the local television channels. The attention of the foreign media has turned to Trump's ear. On 13 July, there was an [assassination attempt](#) on [Donald Trump](#), while he was speaking at an open-air campaign rally in [Butler, Pennsylvania](#). The bullet grazed his ear. He bled.

The media is churning out that the army was called in because the regime alleged that opposition political parties had taken over the Quota Andolon. True. But the fact that the BCL and police were set upon the students to break up their protests – which angered the students and motivated many guardians to join the momentum – has totally been eclipsed. In the media the ministers are claiming that the students have won and the government is negotiating with that and the army is there to stop “the destructive elements.”

In the darkness of night student leaders who were agitating for quota reform are being abducted and beaten up. There was a picture of a battered Nahid who had been taken away in the middle of the night by, supposedly, the Detective Branch (DB) but the DB refuted the information and said they had nothing to do with it. Who is responsible then? Other leaders are also being detained and beaten up. There is no Internet so they are unable to communicate among themselves. What type of negotiation is this? But of course, the authorities have an answer to that. The data centre was burnt down by the agitators? It's going to take some time to fix. Grameen Phone (network provider) has disclosed that they were instructed to shut down the Internet.

Another piece of information has filtered through. This corroborates what I had heard earlier. Some hospitals have been ordered not to take in patients with pellet wounds. Didn't realise rubber bullets could do so much harm. Today's paper had a picture of a victim who had lost his vision in one eye and doctors were surgically trying to remove shattered pellets. The mother's cry rang out in anguish, “Why in the eye?”

No real news at all except for Goebbels' Lies – “repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth.” Tomorrow is also a public holiday. But one is not allowed to go out except for 2/3 hours per day. What kind of holiday is this?

Had serious Internet Withdrawal Syndrome (IWS) and felt isolated. But getting used to talking to people on the normal phone lines.

The gradation of information available is striking: what the local television spews out vs what the foreign media says vs what the local newspapers

write vs what I have heard from friends vs what is available on Facebook vs what I see with my own eyes.

Today was the 3rd day of curfew and the 4th day of the Internet blackout.

This should be the perfect time for reading and writing. Don't I always moan that there isn't time to write because "life" gets in the way? Now we do have the time, but emotionally one is too unsettled for the mental space that is required for writing. Painting is coming along fine. Trying to capture some of the scenes I see on television and YouTube and paint a collage of this month.

Have discovered sudoku on my cell phone. Downloaded the app and now it is my saviour. I spend half the day doing puzzles without feeling guilty. Have to keep those brain cells active. Also keeps the guilt about not writing at bay.

It was announced today that curfew would be lifted slowly – what does slowly mean? In days? Weeks? I went to the rooftop and walked about an hour. "It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good." Another day of missed classes. Let's see what tomorrow brings.

Diary Entry: Tuesday 23 July

Morzina turned up this morning and said if I wrote her a letter giving my home address, etc. she won't have trouble coming and going. Got her NID and told her I would look into who beat her up because they're not supposed to be beating up women who were only travelling to and from work. When she saw I was serious, she begged me not to do anything as it would put her in greater trouble. By her attitude I realised she didn't really get beaten up. Just an excuse to get a few days off. Under the circumstances, can't really blame her. Leaders, politicians, the media, the whole country are lying. She is but a mere mortal anxious about her safety.

According to *The Daily Star*, 170 people in total have died in the last few days. Another 1,427 have been arrested (693 in Dhaka alone); I'm guessing most of them were student leaders, or BNP members and Jamaat followers.

There was a 4-hour relaxation in the curfew from 1 pm to 5 pm Most people rushed out. I heard that Unimart and other department stores were crowded. But mostly people went out to "see what's happening." Call it human nature or Bengali nature. No driver, so couldn't go out. Don't even feel the urge to. Anwer called in the evening, said he'd try to come. Previously I'd told him not to take any risks, but enough is enough. He's been gone since Friday last – that's five days. Perhaps I'll go to Lavender. Check out some junk food – chips and stuff – and perhaps see if the large canvasses have come in. Would like to have some decent meals – Shumi's cooking is tasteless. The only way she knows how

to spice things up is by adding chillies. And green chillies are Taka 800/- kg. That's three pieces for Taka 20! They shouldn't be called green chillies, they should be called gold chillies.

Saw the press conference that the government officials put on. The Law Minister and the Communication Minister were sprouting such lies! And they were so blatant. One wonders how they sleep at night. And how do they face their children? Is power and money all that important? All self-consuming? According to them BNP and Jamaat had planned this beforehand and used the students to destabilise the country. This may, partly, be true but why were the students under attack on Wednesday and Thursday? Why was there shooting and killing the whole of Friday?

Diary Entry: Wednesday 24 July

Curfew was relaxed for seven hours today from 10 am to 5 pm. Anwer came today, after a five-day break. Went over to Gulshan 2 Circle to buy grocery and meds.

The Internet came back around 10 am after six days. But it's very very slow and there's still no social media. That only came in the evening.

Went grocery shopping and bought back a lot of junk. Not feeling guilty though. In some way feel it's deserved. The words, "Things are going back to normal," is being bandied about a lot. But will they? There've been too many deaths among innocent people, too many families affected because their sons were killed or beaten up or taken away in the dead of night – no parent can forget or forgive that. Now everyone is cowed down because of fear of reprisals but there is a deadly calm in the waiting. No matter how many lies they spout the public has seen the government's real face and they are just biding their time. I think this is the calm before the storm.

Diary Entry: Thursday 25 July

Quiet. Did personal stuff in Bashundhara. Have gone back to watching mindless Korean drama and Hallmark channel.

Diary Entry: Friday 26 July

There was no curfew from 8 am - 5 pm today. After the Friday Jum'ah prayers, processions came out. I salute the courage of these people who are out despite the surveillance. The army, the Border Guards and the police are all around, and even the tanks (border guard white vehicle) are all lining the roads. More than 2000 people have been picked up, some student leaders abducted and beaten up

and these protesters – no longer students, but teachers, activists and guardians, are out “laughing in the face of danger.”

More than 5000 have been arrested.

Now SHE (“Who-Must-Not-Be-Named”...) claims that she did not call the students “razakars” (traitors). She says they themselves called themselves razakar when they chanted, “Ami ke? Tumi ke? Razakar! Razakar!” (Who am I? Who are You? Razakar! Razakar!).” She did not mention the 2nd line of the slogan which goes like this:

Ami ke? tumi ke? Razakar! Razakar!

Ke boleche? Ke boleche? Shoirachar! Shoirachar!”

Who am I? Who are You? Razakar! Razakar!

Says who? Says who? The oppressor! The oppressor!

Diary Entry: Saturday 27 July

Had coffee with Niaz Zaman at North End in Shahabuddin Park at 12:30 pm. Actually, had a decaf salted caramel Frappuccino. Niaz Apa had a bagel sandwich and an Americano. I had talked to Niaz Apa the day before and she had sounded very despondent. Nasreen Kabir, the elderly lady with the bob grey haircut and a limp, who tried to come to The Reading Circle (TRC) meetings whenever she could, had passed away a few days ago – within a week of Sigma Huda passing away. It seems Sigma was her cousin. Niaz Apa had known Nasreen for a very long time. Nasreen was one of the founding members of TRC. I didn’t know her that well but lately she had called me up a couple of times. She said, “You are one of the sane members among the lot (TRC).” If only she knew!

Later that night came to know through “Zahed’s Take” that the DB had picked up three of the leaders from the hospital where they were being treated – “to safeguard them.” During the previous abduction they had been brutally tortured, physically as well as mentally. God knows how they’ll be tortured this time! Couldn’t sleep well. The images of blood clotted thighs and backs kept intruding my thoughts.

Curfew off from 8 am to 5 pm today.

Diary Entry: Sunday 28 July

Heard that the DB people had picked up three other leaders; one of them a woman.

By night the news was broadcast that the “andolon” was called off. One of the detained six leaders read out a statement that since their demand about the quota had been fulfilled they were withdrawing from the andolon. This statement contrasted from their statement the day before to their other student workers

that if they were taken and did not come back alive, the students were to continue the andolon. In fact, the student gathering had given the government 24 hours to set the six captured leaders free, otherwise they would call a complete shutdown.

The BNP has called for a nationwide protest tomorrow. Today the curfew was also from 11 am to 5 pm or 6 pm. The curfew this time was much more lenient than during Ershad's time. No one was allowed in the streets at that time.

July 2024 is a crazy time to be living in Dhaka. One can't help but compare it to the 2 July 2016 killing, eight years ago when 20 people, most of them foreigners, were killed during an attack allegedly by so-called Islamic militants at Holey Artisan Bakery late on a Friday.

Diary Entry: Monday 29 July

Had to go to Bashundhara Gaia apartments for a meeting. As we were leaving Gaia I saw a white armoured vehicle (tank) cross the road in front with a lorry full of BGB personnel. Were they going to NSU? Later heard that a big contingent of police had been deployed in front of IUB. I wonder what's happening at IUB.

Saw on YouTube that there had been a big protest march by students in Chattogram. The same in Rajshahi and Jahangirnagar and Sylhet. In Dhaka the protests were mostly in Parana Palton and Dhanmondi.

So despite curfews, despite the police, the BGB, the army being deployed, despite hundreds of deaths, more than 2000 taken into custody and 10,000 injured, despite nightly block raids, and threats, the people are not cowering down. In fact more and more people are becoming vocal. They are openly criticising and cursing the government. I really salute the courage of my people. One ordinary young man, Abu Sayed, was killed and now ten others are coming forward with arms outstretched. They look defiant. They look as if they are ready to be crucified.

Diary Entry: Tuesday 30 July 2024

Didn't go out at all. Lots of processions. The government had declared today "Mourning Day" for the 147 dead. This would've been funny, if it weren't so sad. The protesters called for everyone to turn up with a red head band and a red band across the mouth signifying the blood spilled and the restriction on free speech.

According to a YouTube comment: 30,000 students injured, 20,000 arrested, 270 killed. Missing? No statistic.

Diary Entry: Wednesday 31 July

The curfew was relaxed for 10/11 hours today. There had been skirmishes the whole day, in Dhaka, in Barisal, and in other places. In Dhaka, near the Supreme Court, the lawyers came out to protest against students being taken away in police vehicles. Lawyers, old and young, blocked one van and kept shouting, *Release the Students*. They kept arguing and protesting with the police as the students were being taken away. In another footage, a girl held back a boy who was being dragged by three or four policemen to the police van, then an older gentleman came and tried to pull the boy away. Who says Asian women are shy? Who says Asian women are timid? Who says Bangladeshi girls don't speak up? Now they're blazing ingots as they protest and berate the police and other authority figures – where was all this anger hiding? Who gave them this courage? I will never be the same teacher again – my respect for my students has skyrocketed.

I am reminded of William Blake's poem, "The Tyger." The first stanza goes like this:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Today at 2:30 pm. A colleague from the department of English – created a chat group called "Concerned IUB Faculty," a platform where IUB faculty could voice their concerns. The message said,

We IUB Faculty members, both full time and adjunct, have done our best to stay neutral and try to be silent and in doing so, help to keep our students safe. It's not working. As members of the faculty we have an obligation to stand beside our students and let them know we are with them. This is not an IUB administration effort, this is strictly private. As individual faculty members we can decide how best to support our students at this time and keep them safe as we all navigate this time together.

By evening 147 faculty had joined. It was decided that tomorrow, Thursday, 1 August, we will gather in the area between gate 3 and 4 at 1 pm. Then we will walk out and make a human chain from the water fountain to Putlir Bari. We'll hold placards and wear red hand bands or headbands.

There will also be a formal press release. Heard that the OC of the local thana will be visiting IUB at 10 am. Is this a coincidence or has he heard that we will be forming a human chain tomorrow?

Diary Entry: Thursday 1 August 2024

Didn't sleep too well last night. Kept worrying about how things would pan out today.

Got to IUB at 11:40ish in the morning, but not too many people were around. The OC didn't come till 12:00 noon and didn't leave till 1:25 pm. Quite a few of us had gathered on the ground floor. Once we heard the OC had left, we went out in two columns, one column headed to the water fountain, the other towards Putlir Bari. We were more than a hundred. A few of us had brought red bands but most didn't. One smart woman had brought a red synthetic sari. We ripped this into strips and distributed the strips to whoever wanted a piece to tie around their wrist. The night before we had decided to dress in red and green.

What was I doing here? Protesting against the government was not in my DNA. My parents were committed government servants, so was my husband. And a government servant is just that—part of the government—and one does not protest against oneself. But my parents were gone, and so was my husband, and the last two weeks of July had left me fearing for other lives—not my own.

After 45 years of teaching, my students were scattered, not just around Bangladesh, but all over the world. Some were even second-generation students, the children of my students from Dhaka College and Kabi Nazrul College. After my biological children, I was proud to call them, “my kids.” And when their lives are in danger, I didn't have to think twice before putting myself in the fray.

After all, what are we without our students? The classroom is built on two pillars: those who teach and those who learn and a teacher without students is like a writer without readers.

We build bridges between minds; we spark their interest and ignite their curiosity; we challenge complacency, provoke thought, and sometimes spark transformation. And at the end of the day, what do we teach our students? To stand up for what is just and to demand their rights. They were doing just that. And if that meant they had to face the anger and ire of the government, they would have to go through us before they could get to our students.

Of course, the media found me, and I was asked to say a few words. I did, and ended with, “*Please don't kill our children.*” That's exactly what I felt. Children were the future of a nation; from among them would rise the policymakers, the nation builders, the leaders – and here our rulers were systematically shooting them down.

I wasn't nervous, at all. I spoke loud and clear. We stood for about 45 minutes or so then made our way back inside the campus.

I didn't take any pictures, but others did. I refrained from putting the incident on my Facebook wall. But by evening, pictures of the human chain and

the video of my speech were being shared among my students and faculty colleagues.

Diary Entry: Friday 2 august 2024

One of my old students, N asked for an appointment to meet me at Secret Recipe Rd 55 for coffee. I wondered what she wanted of me. Did she want help applying for admission to a university? Another recommendation, perhaps?

I waited over coffee to see what she wanted and finally it came. She mentioned that A's house had been targeted. Some 30 young men had turned up at night asking for a faculty member of IUB by name. The husband of the faculty had called the police but before that the people in the community had taken charge. Then N said my name was also included among the faculty who might be targeted. I had been listening to her, relaxing after all the tension, over a cup of coffee. At her words my whole body started to tingle. What had I done that would make me a target? I had simply stood up for my students.

There is fighting going on in Uttara – it is being called “the war zone.” The pictures being shared on social media are horrendous. Plain clothes men (CL goons?) running around with machetes, and pistols. Students being carried by other students. Young female students dressed in Viqarunnisa Noon School uniform literally marching up to the police barriers chanting slogans. How are they so brave, I wonder once again. Where does this confidence come from? Arguing with the police, berating them, shouting at them, but also offering them biscuits and water!

Diary Entry: Saturday 3 August

Our students are meeting at 11:00 am in front of Jamuna Future Park.

The protest march today consisted of a number of private university students from the Bashundhara area. A common enemy had succeeded in uniting private university students of different backgrounds in Bashundhara. They got together and marched towards Bashundhara Gate. So there I was, with two replaced knees, hobbling along with them. When the procession started, I was at the front of it. Gradually, I saw them pass me, and finally I ended up near the end of the procession.

When I finally caught up with them, I saw there were a number of other faculty members near the edge of the throng that had formed a “I” at the intersection at Bashundhara Gate. The faculty were not actively participating, but their presence was like a magic cloak, shielding the students. The students knew they were not alone. I didn't get a bird's-eye view since I was part of the multitude.

The police were also there, on the other side of the barrier—still, seemingly relaxed, but with the alertness of a leopard waiting to pounce. We also watched and waited; one eye on the students, the other on the police. At one point, we edged up to the police, and I gave the one nearest us a tentative smile: *“Our students are unarmed. Please don’t hurt them.”* They were surprisingly civil. The one closest to me said, *“Don’t worry, Madam. We’ve been told not to engage with the students. Just to observe.”* That was reassuring... a little.

At one point, we heard that a rival group of students was approaching, accompanied by armed police officers. We edged closer to the police barrier and informed them of what we’d heard. *“Our students are unarmed. If they’re attacked, they will have to fight back. Unless they’re attacked, they won’t do anything.”* We promised this on behalf of our students.

“Unless they do something, we will not attack them,” was their dubious response.

The police consulted among themselves, but there was no sign of increased activity. Then one of them said they would send some of their men to the possible point of conflict.

Suddenly we felt a new energy in the congregation, and the word was passed that another group was approaching from the other end of the road. This meant that if the two rival groups were working in unison and decided to close in, our students would have to run back towards Bashundhara or stand their ground and fight back. There would be a bloodbath. They wouldn’t stand a chance against the armed police. Back we went to the barrier and pleaded with the police: *“Please do something; give protection to the students, otherwise things will escalate, and we will lose lives.”*

The police became even more animated now. The energy around them changed. They started adjusting their uniforms and checking their rifles. One finally said to us, *“We’re sending some of our boys to see what’s happening.”* At that moment, we could do nothing but pray: *“O Allah, help us!”*

We waited. The momentum of the students was such that I feared no one would listen to any sane voice. Also, when you have seen death at such close quarters, as they had in the last two weeks, you lose the fear of death. And when you lose the fear of death, you become free—and reckless.

Time passed; minutes? A quarter of an hour? “The word” came that the rival students had moved away. Or perhaps the whole thing had been fake news.

By this time it was past lunchtime, almost late afternoon. Packets of food and bottles of water appeared out of the blue and were passed around. Where did they come from? Who paid for them? We didn’t ask. It wasn’t important. Any one of us would have emptied our wallets and purses to keep the processionists fed. What was important was that we look after “our kids.”

In hindsight, I can see how volatile the situation was, but at that moment, with images of police brutality flashing across our brains, our only thought was of their safety.

A long time later, the crowd started quivering and slowly disintegrating, moving in another direction. We were told that they were heading towards the Shaheed Minar. My knees were numb by this time, and I rest assured that they would be safe now. I turned back and headed home.

Diary Entry: Sunday 4 August 2004

According to the news on television, by 12 midnight more than 90 people were dead: 18 in Sirajganj, 12 in Dhaka City, 8 in Lakshmipur, 6 in Narsingdi, 5 in Magura, and 4 in Rangpur. In fact, most major cities suffered casualties. By the middle of the day curfew was announced indefinitely from 6 pm today. Together with that a 3-day public holiday from tomorrow. What an oxymoron – indefinite curfew and public holiday. Stay at home and do nothing? We had expected the Internet to be shut down but they had learnt from their mistakes. FB was shut down but the Internet was down only in some areas. Luckily my Internet server stayed put. Most of the “Concerned IUB Faculty” in the chat group turned up in preparation. Being together gives one solidarity. Some of the faculty were with students in Bashundhara. I was glued to the TV the whole day and kept getting pictures of the confrontation. At one point, goons set fire to PG (SMMH) Hospital, attacked public stations, and AL offices. I looked at the ages of the victims who had died – all between the ages of 22 and 40. I see pictures on YouTube of “goons” with rifles, pistols, and machetes. Most of them had helmets. In some of the cases, neither the army nor the police intervened to stop the protesters. It seemed to be the illegal “pet army” of the AL, the Chhatra League and the Jubo League who attacked the protesters and went about doing mass destruction. However, at one stage in the afternoon, a colleague reported seeing “goons” parading the streets below her building with machetes and daos. The army tank went past them but did nothing.

At 16:45 we got a sudden message: “IUB students need emergency help. Location *Karwan Bazar and Sonargaon Hoteler shamme. Keo help koren please.... League and police shob oderke block kore rakeche ber hote parchenna*” (We’re in front of Karwan Bazar and Hotel Sonargaon. Please help.... League and police have blocked them – they can’t get out). One of our senior faculty who lived nearby responded immediately saying his driver “lives across the pond there and is willing to go find him.”

Another faculty commented, “*piprar moton marche!*” (they’re being killed like ants!) – which didn’t help at all. There was an update from the student:

“Amader phone niye jacbe shbaike martese ktha blte partsi na...Beche thke ktha hbe abr Krwan Bazar” (They’re taking our phones; they’re beating up everyone; we can’t talk... we’ll talk if we live through this. Karwan Bazar).

Then a message was sent to the proctor. “It’s urgent sir. Repeat, it’s urgent. Please help, Sir.” The message continued, “IUB students and 150 more students need emergency help. Location Kowran [Karwan] ... *Kew help koren please. League and police sob road block kore rakkheche. Ber hote parchena – SH*” (Someone help please. League and police have blocked all the roads. 1/We can’t get out – SH).

17:09 Faculty post: “Sharif, my driver, found them. They were trapped in an alley. About 50-60 of them. They acknowledged help, but can manage. They are going down Green Road and then homeward (Banasree). Relax you all on this front.” We all heaved an unanimous sigh of relief. We blessed Sharif.

There was a call by Asif Mahmud (a student leader), on behalf of the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, to bring the “March to Dhaka” forward by a day so instead of the 6th it would be the 5th.

The Government has announced a 3-day public holiday (Monday to Wednesday).

The slogan for the March to Dhaka reads: *“Charte hobe khomota Dhakai asbo janata* (You have to leave your seat of power, citizens/people come to Dhaka) – Long March to Dhaka – 5 August

A number of faculty members from the “Concerned IUB Faculty” group are joining the March tomorrow. Very much tempted but with my gammy knees wouldn’t be able to keep up. However, will decide tomorrow morning. No shame in being at the end of the march. I would be one more body and yes, I would have participated.

Imran called and said there would be a bloodbath tomorrow. I told him, just to reassure him, I would probably stay home. He honed in on the “probably.” I changed tactics. I told him I’d stay home. At times ignorance was bliss. What he didn’t know, wouldn’t hurt him.

Diary Entry: Monday 5 August 2024

The Long March to Dhaka

News: Students had gathered at Dhaka University but police stopped them. Glued to the TV. 10 o’clock news: Army chief will address the nation at 2 pm. Everyone is requested to be patient until then. Suddenly at 1:30ish my chat group “Concerned IUB Faculty” came on. Info being shared: “Heavy gunshots close to Bashundhara Block C from 12:00 noon to 1:15 pm.” “Two students injured – taken to Evercare hospital.” “She has already left the country.” “Too many flights

tonight.” “Gunshots at IUB road.” “15 gunshot wounds, 4 are IUB students.” “Huge student gathering in Shabagh.” “Army requested to wait till 2 pm. They are waiting.”

At 1:56 pm the front page of bdnews.com flashed, “Lakhs seen marching towards Shahid Minar from the airport and Shoner Akhra.” How will the nation repay these valiant courageous daughters and sons of the soil?

2:00 pm *Allah rokka koro!* (Allah save us!)

Chief of Army Staff, General Waker-Uz-Zaman to address the nation. Glued to the TV but no real news. Has she left the country? If not, Allah save the students and my country.

I have all three media outlets open: phone, iPad, and television. But it’s already 2:15 pm or is it 2:00 pm? – time has stopped moving – too much is happening. Lunch is forgotten and I have moved to Maina’s bedroom. My chest feels constricted. I take in short breaths. The next hour will decide the fate of the nation.

The energy of the crowds gathered has shifted, the roads that had been blocked the whole day are slowly letting people through. You can feel the tension of the people – turning into – dare I use the word – Jubilation? It moves very slowly, something in the movements of their hands, a movement from aggression to one of affirmation, bonding, relaxation – the unanimous letting go of stifled breaths. The slogans have died away. Now there is a little twitter that gathers momentum and finally there’s a unanimous gasp of joy and relief.

At 4:00ish in the afternoon, General Waker-Uz-Zaman appears on the television screen and announces that SHE has resigned. He says that an interim government will be formed. He doesn’t say too much and the attention of the camera moves to the jubilation of the people. And the people come from all directions. Despite the curfew, despite the shortage of vehicles, despite the police blockade on all roads leading into Dhaka, they have answered the call of the student leaders. A bird’s eye view picture shows rivers of humanity flowing into Dhaka as a body. Their original destination was the Gono Bhaban, HER official residence. This was a sanctuary the public had never been allowed to enter. Special guests on special days had been invited into this “palace.” But now it belongs to the people. The army is present but does nothing to stop the public. And the public goes crazy.

In conclusion, why did I have this urge to write it all down as the events unfolded? The writer doesn’t just observe, she is a witness. The writer *remembers*, *records*, and *responds*. She ensures that we do not forget. In that sense, writing becomes a form of witnessing, and literature becomes not just art, but testimony.

Thus, the writer preserves truth – her truth – and gives voice to those who might otherwise be silenced.

To echo the character Lee Ok-Sun in Keum Suk Gendry-Kim's 2017 novel *Grass*: “*I want the world to know. I want everyone to remember.*”

Finally, here is a poem dedicated to Abu Sayeed. They say no one dies, as long as they are remembered, so Abu Sayeed, live on:

Abu Sayeed

By Razia Sultana Khan

Dedicated to Abu Sayeed who was killed near Begum Rokeya University in Rangpur on 16 July 2024.

“Pop!”

He faces the police, the Border Guards, the army,
the supreme commander – ready to embrace the attack
Come get me if you dare. I'm not afraid.

“Pop!”

His smile stays, his body quivers. Spreadeagled
in victory, not in surrender. Arms outstretched
I am the people!

“Pop!”

Crucifixion-ready, his arms reach out –
the defiance of the innocent – unarmed, harmless –
Allah! Tumi kothai?

“Pop!” “Pop!” “Pop!”

The next one – or two, or three – catch him in the chest.
Still standing. Resistance flickers to reconsideration, realisation
.... relief?

He wavers, stumbles – the bullets take their toll –

Then, like the ashing of an agarbatti, crumples, collapses.

I watch, willing him to stand up, to curl into a ball
reduce the target, turn and run. “Get up! Get up” I scream,
clasping my own body in prayer and pain.

Arms rush in, support the right leg, the left, the slim body;
not a warrior’s muscular body, or the hardened body of a labourer,
but the frail curved body of one who burns the midnight oil

crouched amid a scatter of books, pens and paper.

They drag-lift him away. The perforated cage clings to the soul;
but mangled and broken, finally – lets go.

Abu Sayeed’s motionless body gives motion to the movement.
He resurrects the same day,
comes alive, in the mouths of the people,
rises, phoenix-like, from the ashes.

24 November 2025

Work Cited

Wolff, Tobias. "Bullet in the Brain." *Our Story Begins: New and Selected Stories*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, pp. 263–268.

Appendix

I dabble in oil painting. This one I did soon after 36 July (5 August 2024). Painting this was cathartic – quite painful – and at times I cried as I re-lived the events while I painted these images in the middle of the night.

