

SHORT STORY

Ghost Alley* -Part I

JAVED JAHANGIR

Late at night, Qismat sneaks into their house on *Bhooter Golley*. He passes Raja Miah dozing at the wooden guardhouse at the front gate, his nightstick dangling in his fist, his upturned moustache gently moving to his breath. It is December and dry, yet Qismat feels heaviness in the air, like the gathering of moisture, a quickening. He enters the house through the double doors. Locks the doors behind him with a violent twist of the deadbolt left-right, the door groans and Dhaka city is locked out. Tayeeb, Hasmat, Babar and all the others left behind. Qismat expects to walk into a wall of noise when he walks home. So the silence feels alien, pensive. On the wall as he enters is the large painting of his grandfather the professor-- missing since '71. Other paintings of him hang all around the house. Qismat strides up the stairs fast, he doesn't want to run into anyone, just reach his room at the end of the stairs and lock that door too. Otherwise there are the usual questions, from his mother, his aunt. Questions that he could, quite frankly, skip thank you very much. The whats, whos and wheres of his life could lie with him without being shared or mulled over. It was a day gone, never to return.

The steel banister tight within his fist, two steps at a time he passes the second floor where the bedrooms are-- rooms with the arcane logic that only old houses have-- bedrooms that can only be accessed through other bedrooms, verandah intertwining rooms. Thankfully no sounds from Nani Ma's room, which is furthest from the stairwell, near the verandah that overlooks *Bhooter Golley*. Qismat can do without the screams tonight. Qismat's own room offers the same view as his grandmother's -- the road below, buildings like gaping teeth and the large pond, lying behind the shops and the government buildings. He enters his room and walks over to the window, which is dead-bolted. He flings it open -- he hates that people come here and rearrange his room -- didn't they do enough of that all the damn time? He sits on his bed, notices the jug of water, a glass with a saucer to cover it. Someone has placed these for him-- maybe Ma, maybe Salek Miah. He picks up the saucer gently and drinks the water. What was Salek Miah talking about yesterday, or was it the day before that? - Nadira Nani was arriving in a few days, from Majarkot, the family's ancestral estate. Qismat remembers it as a place where he had once seen two rivers meet-- now a decaying old place where no one went to visit any more. He hasn't seen Nadira

Nani since he was a child, and even then he has vague memories of his grandmother's half-sister. She hadn't visited for many years, there a fight or something. He was quite young and the details are vague. Anyway it was probably better she stayed away. She was too closely related to Qismat's grandfather's disappearance at the end of the war. So why show up now and create more trouble? He sees a flash of a boat gliding along on a black river- then that night long ago after which, his grandmother had never been the same again. Nadira Nani had never come to their house since then -- so why now? But he is still stoned enough that he can shut off thinking about unpleasant things. He tries to sleep, that other escape. Qismat sleeps, but he is taken by the same dreams as every night and the strange creatures come as he lies paralyzed in sleep. There is no peace, no rest, and no forgiveness.

That night an unseasonable hailstorm came. Hailstones, large as eggs -- an ancient pearl of frozen air in the center of each- fell from the white clouds that had been gathering. Qismat lies with his knees bent skyward, uneasy things behind his eyelids. His wooden bed is

shaky. The hailstones fall faster than the beats of his heart, his eyes dart under eyelids and his mind races like the people rushing at him. The hailstones hit tin, roofs, cars, shanties. Taak-Taak-Taak. The noise is everywhere. On their brows are bandannas askew, traces of red *sindoor* glint between the partings of the women's hair. In their arms are round bundles of pots, clothes and rice tied hurriedly. Children in rags, old men without teeth, and women without husbands -- wrists devoid of bangles run, breathing laboriously. Taak-Taak-Taak. And as they come at him, they pass through him like cigarette smoke, their eyes never changing expression. Why do they run? Who from? Taak-Taak-Taak. Amidst the catastrophe that rushes at him like a black age, listen: and there is a single gentle cry 'Wake' someone says. And cool hands touch his face and then the shadow falls over him. Qismat opens his eyes. Qismat wakes with a jump, his heart still beats to the hail. He finds the face staring down at him in the semi-darkness of his room. Like someone has passed from the dream to his room. But his grandmother stands by his bed staring down at him in silence. His hand gripped tightly in hers, a ray of light across her face like a welt. He immediately jumps up.

"Nani Ma! What are you doing? You could have fallen down the stairs! If they find out... you know what always happens!" He rubs his eyes. She looks at Qismat, a slight smile playing somewhere. "Get up boy" She says, "I want to leave tonight... this very night. My time is drawing near." Qismat stares dumbly at the old woman in the shadows. "You saw them tonight... again," she said. "Who...?" and then the dream came back to him like a pond becoming still. "Here, take...take this now" she says extending her hand from the darkness, "now you won't cry when you sleep..." and Qismat suddenly smells roses in her palm. She wipes away tears that had collected on his cheeks-- a magician pulling a coin from someone's ear. He takes the handkerchief and slides it under his pillow, breathing in the deep ether. "Come, come let's go..." She says. Qismat sits upright, and at first his head doesn't stop spinning. "When you tried to run away, before...that night, remember?" Qismat asked.

And on that past night, years ago: The family is awoken! Noises of house doors banging in the night wind! Nani Ma, nowhere to be found in the house! Finally Salek Miah, calls -- "Here! Here! I see her! But she is deep in the shadows in the back of the house where the large yard surrounds the verandahs, bleeds into the old orchard. And Nani Ma? -- Her sari is tucked at her waist, that classic fighting stance. She appears to be talking to someone up a large mango tree. She struggles and fights. From behind his mother, a younger Qismat watches as his small siblings yowl. Nobody knew what had happened that night and nobody could say how she had gotten there or with whom she spoke. But stories sprang like fire. Tales of Nani Ma- the great keeper of Majarkot-- still the true steward against *bhoots*, *petnees* and other demons kept watch. But then there was trouble- no one said anything when her room was locked at nighttime from then on. A sudden movement and his grandmother moves to Qismat's other window- next to the dirty mirror on the wall. The window offers a view of the city through a slit in complicated buildings and scaffolding. She peers off into the darkness and lets out a little tittering sound. "The view here is a different view, Oi." she says pointing at something. Qismat tries to follow and sees



artwork by apurba

what he saw every night. His room--the various posters on his walls, the naked light bulb hanging from the ceiling, his books, his clothes on a clotheshorse. Tonight, something is clearer-- like he has found a little slice of night, in which he had never before been awake. In the mirror, he sees himself and his grandmother, framed by the darkness of the

room. Hailstones ricochet off windows panes outside, some break. They jump and bounce, like frogs under the deluge of the first rains, steel grills jangle and sunshades throb. A rhythm emerges from the clash of the night.

Bangladeshi-born Javed Jahangir lives in Massachusetts. His novel *Ghost Alley* awaits a publisher.

London, Ian Jack and *Granta* magazine

KHADEMUL ISLAM

"Can you come in on Friday morning at ten am?" Ian Jack, editor of *Granta*, had emailed me on July 11. The address: Hanover Yard, Noel Road, behind the Queen's Pub. A few days later, however, emerging from Angel underground station into the shadows cast by tall buildings, I was stuck. Where was Noel Road? It had been five years since I had last been in London, and was still getting re-acquainted with the business of getting around the city on my own. A turn ventured at an alley whisked me away from the gloom to a sunny street. Dhaka sunlight! This was the first time I had been to England in the summer, and the light was a continuing marvel. A woman pointed out Noel Road, and in a few minutes I was at the pub. Behind it, at the end of a cul-de-sac, was a neat-looking, white house. It was very quiet here, no crackle of Polish or any of London's newer immigrant accents. Very English. The sign by the door said '*Granta*' in neat capital letters.

It was nice inside. A good-sized reception area with light streaming in from large windows. Nothing like the lit magazine digs in Martin Amis's novel *The Information*: "The offices of *The Little Magazine* were little offices...Evicted often and forcibly from this or that blighted flatlet, it sometimes lingered in the dark behind the beaten door like a reeking squatter in his vest." I was directed upstairs to the second floor, to Ian's large corner room. Books and papers on tables and window shelves, but not too much of them. Perhaps, as he had written once in *The Guardian*, Ian had actually tossed out a few old books. I remembered the article because of its Larkin quote, "Books are a load of crap." *Granta* was fond of Philip Larkin. On the cover of the *Family* issue they had dared to print Larkin's famous line about family, along with its four-letter word. Ian, in jeans and with his white shirttails out, got up from his computer desk and shook hands. He moved us to another table. His face looked somewhat familiar but I couldn't quite place it then.

Ian Jack has been the editor of *Granta* since 1995. England's leading literary magazine (or perhaps on both sides of the Atlantic) was started by students at Cambridge university in 1889 and named after a river there. Till 1979, when under Bill Buford *Granta* radically transformed itself into a serious literary magazine devoted to "new writing," it had been a student magazine purveying "jests... (and) pastiches of Kipling," as Ian wrote in the 2004 *Jubilee* issue. When Buford left for *The New Yorker* magazine in 1995, Ian was handed the keys to house.

I came to read *Granta* late. The British Council library in Dhaka didn't have it, and anyway I was more drawn to American books and writers, which I saw as a counterpoint to British fustiness. The first *Granta* I read was mailed to me in America by my sister. Number 34, 1990, *Death of a Harvard Man*. *Granta* at first felt strange, its writing and writers of a different order and key. Without a subscription, it was difficult to get hold of in the USA, but I would chance upon the occasional volume. The one on *Family*, of course, the Vargas Lhosa one, *Best of Young British Novelists '83*, *Food*, *Fifty*, *London*, the one on India. *Granta* led me to writers like James Fenton, Martha Gellhorn, Martin Amis, Iain Banks, and later, Decca Aitkenhead. It published radically different kind of travel writing and photo essays; its prose and themes occasionally seemed viscerally closer to the Third World I called home than its American counterparts; and it could still jest, as demonstrated by Michael Mewshaw's funny piece on Anthony Burgess ("Do I Owe You Something", Autumn 2001). By that year I was a subscriber.

But shortly afterwards I returned to Bangladesh,

where supply was non-existent. My brother got me a year's subscription, but only one issue made it through to Dhaka. And the British Council library still didn't stock it.

Later on in my trip, though, fate intervened. Going through used books at New York's landmark Strand bookshop, I came across *Granta* back issues, a buck a copy. I wish I could have picked up the whole lot, instead of having to choose the seven or eight due to airline weight restrictions. Back in Dhaka, I have read a whole lot more of *Granta* writing. Still, there are many issues I know nothing about.

Our chat started off slowly, mainly because -- well, literary editor of an English-language newspaper from Bangladesh, I am quite sure Ian hadn't seen the species before. He began by asking about the old port bungalows in Narayanganj, and about the Rocket steamer to Barisal. He had once, he confided, wanted to write on steamboats in the subcontinent. He mentioned Faridpur and Comilla.



Surprised, I asked if he had been to Bangladesh? Turned out yes. Turned out Ian had been a newspaperman, in fact, *The Sunday Times's* correspondent in New Delhi. From 1991 to 1995, he had been the editor of *The Independent on Sunday*. It was then that the penny dropped, why his face had seemed familiar. It was the accompanying photo, a younger Ian in white kurta pyjamas, to his piece in the *India: The Jubilee Issue* of *Granta*. I was nonplussed. I had read some of his articles in *Granta* and *The Guardian*, and true, there were references to India in them, but somehow I had never picked up on the fact that he had been a foreign journalist in Delhi. Or if I had, I had forgotten it in the intervening years.

Journalism, then, accounted for his writing style, which was direct and un-donnish, as if he had taken to heart author Elmore Leonard's dictum: "Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip." Birds flitted outside the windowpanes. London birds. In Dhaka I no longer heard the *kokeel* I used to in the mornings. Too much apartment construction, too much leveling of green. Plus the growing army of the dispossessed on the streets. *Granta*, Ian said, had evolved into the magazine it was now because standard definitions of what constituted literature didn't apply any more ("literature, whatever that is"). With the old formulations suspect, almost by default, then, any literary magazine worth its salt had to venture forth into newer areas, explore newer forms. This trend, a distinctive kind of nonfiction - memoir, history, travel, and a superior kind of reporting - had been strengthening in the writing published in *Granta* under Ian's aegis. What did he look for, I asked. "Good writing," he answered. He didn't go beyond it, it was something obvious to him, rather like the judge who said that he couldn't define what pornography was but

that he would know it when he saw it. *Granta* had steered clear of structuralism or postmodernism and any of the other isms, that "we haven't gone near that, wouldn't know what it was," and that hindsight was showing that perhaps they had been right to do so. He returned again, with relish, to what basically *Granta* was intent on publishing: "the long, involved, searching essay." "Reportage." Writing had to bring fresh news, fresh perspectives about us, about the earth. Mere technique wouldn't do. There were writers who had a lot of technique, a lot of polish, but had really nothing new to say, nothing fresh to give, and so...here he trailed off and looked up at the ceiling.

I asked about "writers from the margin," whether *Granta* should publish more of them. Say, from Bangladesh. Here Ian squirmed a little in his chair. I sympathized silently. No editor, least of all of a literary magazine, should have to guarantee publication based on degrees of marginality alone. "Well, if it's good writing," he said finally. Fair enough! How did they choose a theme for each issue? Well, mostly at staff meetings. Sometimes it just came to them, as when after 9/11 they brought out the *What We Think Of America* volume, chiefly "because the 9/11 theme was being done," no pun intended, "to the death." Much more rarely, it happened that a writer would submit an outstanding piece, and then *Granta* would get other writers to "build around it."

And so he roamed over other related topics: the practice at *Granta* of working closely with their writers, the "retail" book publishing business in Britain, the latest issue of *Granta* (*On The Road Again: Where Travel Writing Went Next*), the difference in money between America and England in terms of magazines and publications. "Editors here in England," he said with a self-deprecatory grin, "nobody gives much of a damn, I mean we are okay, but it's over there, in America," where they commanded power and money. For obvious reasons, I didn't bring up the topic of editors in Bangladesh.

But there was also good news. *Granta*, previously owned by Rea Hederman of *The New York Review of Books*, had been bought (saved was more like it) last year by Sigrid Rausing. Sigrid is one of the billionaire heirs to the Tetra-pak (the cardboard cartons for liquids) fortune, and she was interested in expanding *Granta Books*, the journal's book publication arm. Later, in New York, over lunch, I asked Kim about Sigrid. "Oh, she's huge in funding for human rights," Kim, who herself works for a non-profit, replied. "Her foundation does a lot of good work. Why, are you going to meet her?" "Jesus, no, no. Somebody mentioned her very favourably, that's all."

Before leaving, I gave Ian a copy of *The Daily Star Book of Bangladeshi Writing*. He accepted it gratefully, and thumbed through it, peered at the Contents, looked at the cover. "This was published in Bangladesh?" "Yes." He took me over to meet Fatema Ahmed, who is the managing editor of *Granta*. Her folks are originally from Bangladesh. She told me about a novel by Tahmina Anam (who is the daughter of our editor Mahfuz Anam, I informed them to their surprise), due to be published from Britain next year. Fatema had read the manuscript. And? "It's good." Ian then affably padded downstairs with me, saw me to the door. I shook his hand and stepped outside. It was downright hot. Was this London, or Dhaka...

Khademul Islam is literary editor, The Daily Star.

Descent

SUTOPA SENGUPTA (translated by Asa Karim)

Many times have I tumbled over backwards, gotten up, in the mud Huffed-puffed, dusted myself down, a broken-ribbed umbrella Mended-patched, stood up to again be held in some soft hand A wet fist, a slightly desolate handkerchief

Noontime's end
 Yet dust blows in the park
 The sun like half-molten wax
 A hailstorm, again a tumble into the deep

I have no job, nothing else to do on this afternoon of delight.



Asa Karim is a free-lance writer/translator.

artwork by faisal

Poem

ADOITO HAROON

Dessert
 Let's look inside
 One last time
 For the hurricane light
 And the aftertaste
 of a sloppy night
 Words lend a hand
 To crippled plots that demand
 The last audience
 How much for the pretence?
 Stopped so low
 To caress, press
 And to let those animals grow
 Words make my reality
 Opinions my frailty
 Ideas are only words in the sky
 Spit out like sperm and die
 "You're cute" she says
 I get cuter as drinks progress
 And the God departs
 Easy to undress
 Harder to redress.

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