

POETRY



# The spirits of the forest

AHMAR MAHBOOB

The spirits of the forest  
Live high in the canopies  
When we cut their lodges  
They die along with the trees

The beasts who fill the forests  
Live amongst the brooks and mist  
When we kill their rivers  
They drown along with the fish

The lives who make this planet  
Live near, live far, in-between  
When we murder our Earth  
We destroy both lands and dreams

The spirits of the forest  
Live high in the canopies  
When we cut their lodges  
They die along with the trees

Ahmar Mahboob is a Linguist. Currently, he is Associate Professor at the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney.

# Something missing

MITALI CHAKRAVARTY

Something missing from  
this dish and that.  
The flavour not quite right —  
Je ne sais quoi\*  
A dash of cinnamon  
A touch of ginger  
We try —

Something missing from  
this life and that.  
The joie de vivre lost —  
a medley of confusion  
A dash of teardrops  
A touch of depression  
Do we try —

We do not —  
Why not?

Is a dessert more important than our life?

\*je ne sais quoi — French, I do not know what  
\*joie de vivre\* — French, exuberance of life

Mitali Chakravarty is a writer and the founding editor of Borderless Journal. She likes to ride on light beams and waft among clouds in quest of a world drenched in love, tolerance, kindness and harmony.



PHOTO: ORIGINAL ART BY ZAYN SHAFIQUE, A SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ASPIRING TO BE AN ARTIST WITH A PURPOSE.

# Clipped wings

FAYEEZA ZAREEN

I’ve been screaming for so long  
My aching throat feels raw,  
And my wrists bruised black and blue  
From your cruel hold;  
Your shackles on me  
have rendered my legs powerless,  
My tongue, heavy from words I can’t say  
My lips sting, you’ve taped them shut so tight;

I’ve been crying out for so long  
My eyes have run out of tears to shed;  
Still my words don’t reach you  
And my voice has become  
nothing more than white noise,  
Yet you can’t seem to hear me

No words of mine can eradicate  
The poison in your mind  
But I’ll keep breathing life  
Into my words, hoping  
You might grow some ears one day.

Fayeeza Zareen is a young girl of sixteen, a conscious learner, and a conscientious writer in the making.

# On Vocabulary in Writing

MOHAMMAD SHAMSUZZAMAN

Back in the mid-90s when I was majoring in English literature at a public university in Dhaka, Bangladesh, I was a cricket buff. For the Bangladeshis, cricket was a transnational love affair in the 90s. We didn’t have a national cricket team of international standard the way we do now. Most of us used to root either for India or Pakistan, though some used to savor the brutal beauty of Caribbean cricket. India was my favorite team. Watching India play was not enough. I became curious about the players. I started to read two of the premier cricket magazines in India: the *Sportworld* and the *Sportstar*. Prior to reading in these two cricket journals, I was tempted to think that cricket and literature were very much linked. As Sir Garfield Sobers once said, having seen former Indian captain Mohammad Azharuddin bat, ‘This is poetry in motion.’ I found no poetry, though, in the prose of these two magazines. They almost zapped my interest in cricket. The two journals marketed carefully crafted complexity with jazzy visuals. Unprocessed chunks of uncommon words and phrases in unusually long sentences asked for patience and cognition that I never had. Was I a bad reader then? Yes, likely! I perhaps was the victim of bad writing, too. Bad writing bamboozles readers with highfalutin gobbledygook. Don’t you want all the Latinate words (e.g., bamboozle, highfalutin, and gobbledygook) in the previous sentence replaced with easy Anglo-Saxon words? These words put on display the pedantry of their authors, without creating and conveying any unique meaning to readers. These words tart up simple meaning into complex verbiage to huff readers. Some readers might be impressed by the writer’s chintzy attempt to sound sophisticated with these pompous words. When reading is reduced to decoding words, not discovering meaning, writing becomes lexical or word-dependent. Writing should be semantic or meaning-dependent. Meaning in writing is constructed by appreciating the collocation, connotation, and usage of words. Any word, whatever it means, is inanimate. Words become animate when a writer breathes life into them in sprightly prose. In sprightly prose, words are organic; they resist being

replaced. Mark Twain famously said, “Use the right word, never its second cousin.” Basic writers, however, often opt for the “second cousin” of a word. They enact a writing strategy what composition scholar Sandra Perl calls the “thesaurus philosophy of writing.” They always want to gussy up their prose with up-market words. They consult a thesaurus, a treasure-trove of synonyms and antonyms. While they write and revise, instead of making semantic changes, they make lexical changes. That kind of writing intends either to impress or to intimidate. Neither of these last two is



the purpose of writing. Good writing communicates clearly, because it embodies precision and concision as well as elegance and eloquence in maneuvering its lexical options. The tone and tempo of a piece of writing is created and maintained through words. When words are flabby, writing fails. When words shine, writing succeeds. Speaking of all writers, the Irish dramatist Samuel Beckett once said, “Words are all we have.” And having words means to own them to bend and break them as needed while writing. Owning all the words in a dictionary of the English language, however, is hardly likely. Steven Pinker mentions in *The Language Instant* that the English language has approximately 100,000 basic words, excluding the derivatives (e.g., teacher, teaches, teaching, and taught). While someone can dare to memorize all the basic words in En-

glish, it might take about 35 years given that humans can commit eight words a day to their short-term memory, as Amy Tucker claims in *Decoding ESL*. Words committed to memory constitute receptive vocabulary, which is defined as the ability to recall the multiple meanings of a word. Receptive vocabulary is restricted to the form of words -- meaning the dimensions of words, not the application of words. If one wishes to be functional with words, she needs to convert her receptive vocabulary into productive vocabulary, the ability to use the multiple aspects of a word in writing and speaking. That’s a lifelong process, because that requires coming across a word in authentic contexts such as reading or writing or listening approximately 10-20 times, as research reveals. So, a word learned is not always a word earned, because words only gradually sink in with their shades of meaning. Earning a word has never been a single-shot event. It’s a complex, time-consuming process. That necessarily doesn’t imply that a potential writer has to wait to begin writing until she has learned an adequate number of words. In Stephen Greenblatt’s introduction to the *Norton Shakespeare*, we read of “Shakespeare’s astonishing vocabulary of some 25,000 words.” Greenblatt calls this an “immense word hoard” and compares it to the 12,000 words of John Milton, “his closest rival among the great English poets of the period.” Compare these icons of English literature with an aver-

age native speaker of English these days, who possesses, impressively, between 10,000-20,000 words. If vocabulary were at all the primary (re)source of writing, the world would not have had to celebrate Shakespeare and Milton since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. They would have been replaced and surpassed by many of us who have read and written since. Vocabulary physically manifests writing, but writing is not planking down words on pages or a computer screen. Writing that resonates to transcend space and time is filtered through keen observation, experience, and intuition. These attributes of writing are apparently disconnected with and unaffected by the limitation or abundance of vocabulary. A writer with all these attributes draws from what Steven Pinker in *The Language Instinct* calls “mental dictionary,” which enables a writer to approximate an infinite number of thoughts with a finite number of words. The assumption that vocabulary is preeminent among skills that learners of a language have to master is problematic when it comes to writing in a second language. For basic writers, who have just embarked upon writing in a second language, a ‘mental dictionary’ might not even exist. For basic second language writers, words are not etched to their experience. And the words they come across in their home countries might have peculiar cultural connotations in other English-speaking countries. As a graduate student in the U.S. in 2005, for example, I was corrected when I used the word “patronize” to mean support. My teacher claimed that “patronize” did not mean support; it, instead, meant to ‘condescend’ or to ‘belittle’. Since then, I’ve never used the word “patronize” to mean support, though I keep using ‘patron’ to mean someone who supports arts and artists. Around the same time, I had to pair up with one of my classmates for a video vignette, in which we began introducing each other. I introduced her as my *intimate* friend. She corrected me, “I’m not your intimate friend. I’m your close friend.” My ignorance embarrassed me, but I learned that the meaning of a word varies across cultures. For years until I reached the U.S., *intimate* used to mean *close*. In the U.S., the word *intimate* has a different connotation, and

it’s strictly restricted to mean a specific kind of relationship status. I still have *intimate* friends in Bangladesh, who occasionally wear *boots*. In the U.K, though, no one wears boots, because “boot” is not a type of footwear there, as it in the U.S. and elsewhere. *Boot* refers to the trunk of a car in the U.K. How wee is the world of words! Likewise, what is a traffic light everywhere in the world, is a *robot* in South Africa. Years back when I was reading Nelson Mandela’s autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, I was surprised by such words as *veldt* (grassland) and *kraal* (African village of huts). English no longer remained English as it crossed borders. It became American, Asian, African, and Oceanian. Words spawned, while meaning altered and expanded. Writing presupposes that a writer stays abreast of the ever evolving and expanding vocabulary in English. Writers are word-smiths. They bend, break, and mend words to create semantic structures in various genres. If they are limited by words, they can’t take full advantage of the most critical tool of their trade. So, their writing becomes vapid. Steven Pinker claims in *The Sense of Style* that varied words and the use of uncommon vocabulary are the two hallmarks of good writing. He further claims that if he were forced into exile and allowed to take with him only one book, that book would be a dictionary. All writers consult a dictionary frequently while reading. Whoever excels in writing notices while reading how ideas and insight are embodied in and generated by words that dance and dazzle. As they write, they imitate the good prose they read with a touch of ingenuity added to insert their voice and vision. Put bluntly, writing is word processing. When one word rubs with another in writing, it either lumbers or radiates. And words in good writing always radiate to enlighten and entertain. Command of words is essential to good writing, but until we add to those words our sense of play and originality and truth and commitment, they are not quite enough.

Mohammad Shamsuzzaman is an Assistant Professor, Department of English and Modern Languages, North South University, Bangladesh.