

fiction

# Despair at the Door

by Mohit Ul Alam

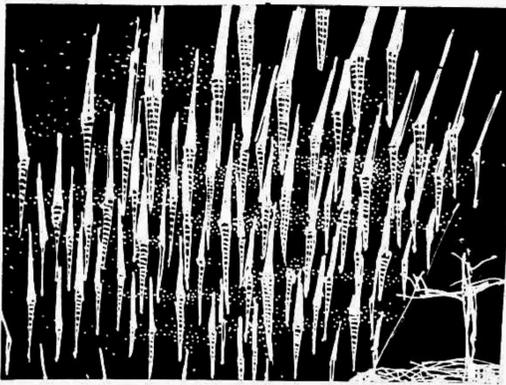
**T**HE small yard was unclean and fungal green. It lay apologetically at the feet of the big three-storied L-shaped building, owned by Tafazzal Hossain, a retired govt officer who had recently died.

From midway onwards the sun lies to the west of the house which casts its own shadow on the yard like a blanket. And Mr Tafazzal Hossain could not foresee the problem, as he had not sensed either how his youngest son, Monu, would be like, who had already made some name as the translator of Dr Faustus into Bengali. Yet Mr Tafazzal Hossain had his own philosophy about life: one must not yearn for things, let things come to him. He explained to everybody that he didn't ever plan to have a house built, but he went on building on with the feeling as if it were building itself. Raising a son was to him could not be of any consequence either, though at one point, let us say, nearly at the fag end of his life he seriously thought life had rather been better attended to. The potential of the character of Dr Faustus conjured up an impossible dream in him, and he looked up at Monu as the enactor of what he could have been if life had been differently led. He felt like fixing up the missing links once again, as a lineman picks up the severed electric cables, after a storm has blown them asunder, one after another and carefully replace them into the joint box. However, if this thought of having his life revised had occurred to him before he had built the house, he would probably not have finished making the house. Anyway, the house he built does not host of any architectural innovation to its making, but since he was a respectable man in the neighbourhood, nobody argued with him. After all the neighbourhood had been inhabited by people of low profession like masons and carpenters, and decorators and laundries, and so on compared to whom he was a royal personage and his decision to buy a plot in the area and build a house was taken as a condescending gesture. After buying the plot their Mr Tafazzal Hossain easily became one of

the highly regarded citizens of the area. The house was built every slowly, brick by brick, wall by wall, over a few years, as Mr Tafazzal Hossain frequently halted the construction work when he ran out of money. Mrs Sakina Bibi, his wife, when she looks at the house she sees nothing but her husband's sweat mixed up in every brick laid.

After Mr Tafazzal Hossain's death, a peculiar restlessness caught everybody in his family. Of his four sons three stayed out of the country, and the remaining son, that is Monu, the youngest son in the family, took to drugs nobody knew when, and he now stayed with the mother, enjoying the lordship of the house. Soon, however, his drug-habit overtook him, and he of late demanded that his portion be written off to him. He had three sister who all came from their respective in-law's house to mediate. Finding in the process an opportunity to bargain for their own portions of land, they sided with the brother.

Sakina Bibi had much the same acumen as her husband about worldly matters though she didn't understand why her husband should have been so much excited about the publication of a book. She felt threatened, but she stood tooth and nail to preserving her possessions. And, acting on the advice of an elderly woman in the neighbourhood, she arranged for the marriage of the youngest son with a girl whose father had started life as a street-vendor and then slowly became rich through questionable means. She compromised herself on the matching thinking that the marriage might change her son. But the marriage had worsened the situation, because the bride soon proved herself a worldly-wise woman, and relished the idea that nobody should intend to share the house except her husband, since he was virtually the caretaker of the house. The first thing she so significantly did was to sell to the old-paper hawkers the stock of the unsold copies of Dr Faustus. She reasoned that Monu would have anyway sold them off to collect money for his drugs. Sakina Bibi privately applauded the matter-of-fact approach of her daughter-in-law. The daughters who were otherwise as greedy and steely



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as their sister-in-law were astonished to see that the situation could have taken such a reverse direction. They secretly bit their hand.

The three sons who were kept informed about these developments through various zealous quarters from the relatives' circle, fumed to their mother through e-mail and fax sent to a nearby fax-office at the market, or, when they were generous, through telephone, for which they called at the telephone owned by one of her tenants upstairs. They wondered why their mother was not able to continue with the discipline of their father's time! Why not keep the house in peace. All this they did without knowing about the further cause of worry for their mother that had started from another source. She hadn't

yet divulged to anybody her worries, but was passing sleepless nights wrecking her brain as to the intention behind the frequent visits of her newly brought-in bride's father.

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When she suggested that she was disappointed, he continued, "Sister, give him more responsibility. Press him down with work, you know, an ass doesn't move if it is not loaded. Let this

book-writing case clear up from his brain, he'll be alright. There's an ass in him, so he'll work."

"So," she quipped, not being able to discern the clue to the vendor-cum-merchant's language.

The woman who mediated the marriage sat respectfully on the floor near the door. The house dog, with hairs moulting by bad sores that stank, lay across the doorstep painting. The tenants upstairs and on the top floor had mildly objected to Sakina Bibi about the dog. Sakina Bibi had turned a deaf ear to it. It is the tenants' headache to stay in her house or not. The bad smell from the dog spread inside, and Monu's father-in-law dug out a white cotton handkerchief from his punjabi's pocket and wiped his nose in obvious style. Sakina Bibi chose to ignore this offer of obvious protestation of etiquette from the vendor-turned-merchant relative. She didn't whisk off the dog either. The neighbouring-woman was busy preparing rolls of betel-leaf from a silver case. His eyes staying on the woman for a moment, the merchant said, "Put very little lime on my leaf, sister." Then continued, "put Monu in business, invest money, I'll look after the rest." He paused, keen on seeing what impact his words had made on Sakina Bibi. Reading her mind he said, "I know your sons don't send you any money from abroad. And knowing Monu's nature, they won't give him any money either. But if you could manage somehow some money, I think Monu could start his anew."

The neighbouring woman was the same age as Sakina Bibi's and was a friendly companion in her rather lonely and troubled life. She now said, "Why, brother, it is your duty to provide your own son-in-law. Why are you trying to shift your responsibility?"

The merchant had reddish irises, as if he passed sleepless nights. Now they flickered, and his clean-shaven pock-marked face twitched, and his lips wound round as if he would produce a whistle. His well trimmed moustache momentarily formed wings like a bird. A middle-aged man, with thick short-cropped hair, he was sitting crossed legs in a large wooden chair made of Yangon

teak, a prized furniture in the family. Sakina Bibi sat on a plastic stool facing him. She was deeply searching for something in his manners or speech that might confirm the inner mistrust that she had about this man from the beginning. As he spoke, his deep-set teeth shone as brightly as the white stones he wore on his fingers. He looked a man capable and confident.

She made a quick decision. "Brother," she said, "Actually I have no money."

"Ohm," He sounded restrained, though it did not hide the irritation he felt at being dissuaded. Then he yielded, "Just suppose, your compound is so big, you can get rid of some portion of it."

With great efforts Sakina Bibi concealed her rage at the audacious suggestion. An unspeakable sadness ran through her spine like a cold shock. She once again felt small, and she rued it. As she opened her mouth, her voice sounded like boiled metal: "Brother, nobody sells nothing here."

"Ohm," sounded the merchant again, this time accompanied by a horrendous belching. Then, silent for a few moments, he shuffled his legs, glided his right hand strangely inside his punjabi to scratch an itch on the chest, and abruptly rose up to go cutting short on the courtesy. His daughter came out from the kitchen with tea and some cookies, but he was already gone. She looked at Sakina Bibi mutely who was too preoccupied to notice it.

The neighbouring woman protested, "Your father was angry, he almost stepped over the dog here."

The young wife protested, "The dog stinks, I would rather that the Corporation people came and killed it."

At this Sakina Bibi swung back from her thoughts. Her retort was instinctive, "You mean anybody could kill my dog that easy! It's Monu's father's dog, nobody touches it."

Inwardly, however, she had a feeling of everything going out of control.

That evening Monu exploded. "Why wouldn't you give me money? Give me my portion, I'll sell it."

To be Continued

## poems

### Portrait of Pushkin

By Alauddin Al Azad

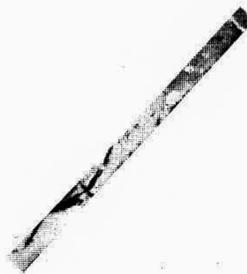
The bullet that pierced the heart of Pushkin  
Was made of Damascus steel—  
Which harnessed in darkness, was but an  
instrument;  
There had been many elements within the hard  
crust—  
The main being the arrogance of imperial power  
Steeped in lust and sheer debauchery  
And though vile, they dazzled like xysters in  
the spectrum:  
Spread from the chandeliers — baffled eyesight  
Instead of enabling read the writing on the wall  
But one thing loomed large — a shadow of fear  
The down-turned face of a poet is like a volcano  
That breathes normally love and truth and longs  
for  
The Beautiful — (also dangerous, of course) —  
But when time comes with glowing cheeks  
ripened  
Like golden apples — pointed look, in the blue  
Seaborne eyes on a steed as the Pegasus —  
He is poised upright and firm with open mouth  
To emit scorching streams of crimson lava,  
Escorted by fire, formation of smoke  
That can engulf kingdoms — a thousand Pompey  
The poets can never be trusted, never.

### II

Not only a poet but also he was one  
Streaming in whose veins the African blood  
Warm enough, and dark too as that Continent:  
Small wonder that the complex frame of his face  
Would alternate between wisdom and passion  
Upon his shoulders winged-out two birds of  
storm—  
Protest and revolt — to fly up any moment.  
Small wonder then soon he would be brought  
to book  
Would be its Odessa, though flavoured with the  
Arcadia  
Could be it's Mickallovskoe Placid in lush green  
(How a captive consoled his soul in that place)  
A poet can be chained but can never be  
Defeated — he plays on lyre in Hell,  
Like Orpheus whom the rocks and the trees  
followed  
While in music and yielded Pluto the god  
of Hades to give back his beloved Euridice —  
Clustered by curly hairs look! hung his strong  
head  
Over the jewel-decked throne with burning eyes  
No wonder that he will be caught in court-  
intrigue.  
Brought to a snow-covered spot the place of  
his destiny  
Whence to return only for house to his 'true place'.

### III

While I was engrossed in the portrait of Pushkin  
By Diprensky this autumn evening  
I forgot myself — even the curious crowd



Of visitors to the Gallery seemed shadows  
around —  
Fully absorbed I thought I was watching my  
own  
Face, in the mirror which at far deep horizon  
Reflected the majestic silver-capped Caucasus  
Above, clouds plunged over the edges of great  
naked cliffs and a stream rushed resounding—  
Below, spread green groves patches of moss  
and herbs:  
Set in a colour television the video-tape  
Of my memory also replayed the voyage  
From Feodosia to Gurzuf — farewell to the sea —  
The village of Bolodino blessed not merely  
In tender words but also with the Muses —  
Who favoured a fresh flowering of poetry —  
And how to forget the haunt of Luchinnik wood  
(my Madonna do you remember the Tsarskoye  
Selo?)  
Be not surprised if I died not only in Petersburg  
I succumbed to injuries inflicted on me  
In Madrid — Berlin — Santiago — Dacca — Tehran  
I died a thousand deaths at more places on earth  
And am living yet to die again for another rebirth.

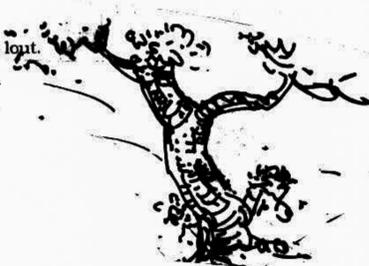
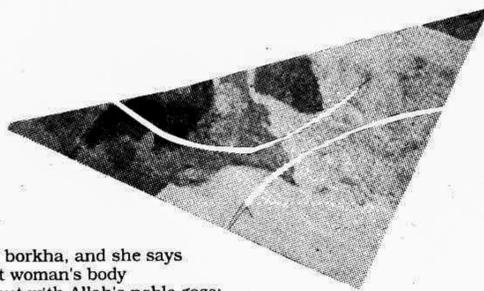
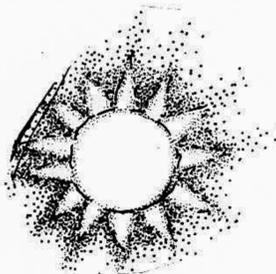
### Borkha

by Farhad Mazhar

My girl-friend doesn't wear borkha, and she says  
The pure ones never look at woman's body  
With mischievous glance, but with Allah's noble gaze;  
Only the lecherous raise the excuse of borkha.  
Let Allah bind black cloth on the sight  
Of these impure men.

What do you think? Look, the weavers and tailors wait,  
They too are anxious for you to opine  
They have a living to earn, in scissor and cloth  
Their sewing machines will run at your behest.

Lord, look, not bad; nicely dressed, there's —  
There's cap, but a black band on his eyes,  
The idio walks. No borkha in sight,  
And people know quick who's pure and who's a lout.



### Bibi Khadija

I write these verses in Mistress Khadija's name:  
I'll not say Bismillah, just take her name.  
Lord, permit me. No anger, please, just once.  
In her name I'll write my poem, Lord of Praise.

Dear Prophet's name? No, his name neither, boss.  
Just'n Khadija's name — in exquisite Khadija's name  
For once I'll forget all other names on earth  
Forget you too, forget my Prophet.

Only she, Lord, only in her wage-work  
Was my dear Prophet ensconced, rapt with camel and trade.  
Don't show off — the Prophet was your beloved  
But, for her, a salaried worker —

All women know you are puny here  
But don't show it abroad for the sake of honoring you.

### I Want to Know

I want to know why you begot  
Adam by yourself, my Lord, and so his rib  
You borrowed to breed Queen Eve —  
Whose fault? Lord, say, yours or our Queen Eve's?

In woman's womb I see that very rib  
You just keep breeding from the earliest days,  
Beloved Lord. A single Adam makes men boast, yet see,  
The woman, birthing a billion Adams, still keep still.  
How compare, one with a billion?  
If man is sand, woman's Himalay-high.

Yet men are stupid, no sense  
Allah gave no breasts yet vainly they stick chest out,  
I am shamed by woman, in debt.  
If you made me male, why make me poet as well?

Translated by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak

### Eden's Gypsy

by Afroza

Bright-hued sari  
adorned by rainbow colored glass bangles  
that do not match,  
Hair subdued by coconut oil.  
Crowned by a basket of thatched bamboo,  
carrying in it the tool of her trade,  
secretly guarding her only remaining charm,  
the rest indentured,  
or minimized by wage.

The zaminder called out to her  
for his grandchildren's amusement.

Once inside the mater's house.  
She beckoned the serpent.  
"Bite the Lord of the House."  
Uncomfortable laughter  
Reigned in by currency.  
But, her basket had already been opened.