

## poem

### Stagnation

By Camellia Ahmad

The summer sun shimmers overhead  
Like a helpless mirage pinned to the heavens  
Flailing its limbs at this forced crucifixion  
And bleeding a scorching effulgence onto the earth below.

The stagnant land drowned in this throbbing heat  
Watches me in bleak complacency.  
It stares dully through the dust-coated landscape  
Chained forever in subservience to its agricultural masters

The Ox-bow sits astride the marshy banks  
Severed from the Parent River  
That rushes in brisk torrents,  
Just beyond its reach.

The smiling quiescent lake, so willing to abase itself,  
Parts in ready submission to the puny fishing boats  
That slice rudely through its sluggish waters  
To enslave its bosom.

Faint echoes of the oars  
Ripping into the supine windless lake  
And the muffled bickering of fisher-women  
Ripple through the still air.



Frozen in time and innocence  
Little naked children squat on the shore  
Oblivious to the stifling listless heat  
Their little wet bodies gleam like newly spawned stars.

The wind is trapped in the drooping rust-yellow leaves  
Of the solitary young Banyan that dominates the barren plain  
Like an icon to the vigorous parasitic stagnation suffusing the land  
While all that's worthy wallows in resigned defeat

Its smug parasitic roots gleefully at work  
Some sponge into a decrepit date palm,  
Gnarled and stooped with its malignant burden like a dying relic  
Of the land's forgotten dignity and potent life

Some aquiver in a victory dance with the captive wind-  
Whipping through the heat  
Like a Medusa trembling with triumphant laughter  
Mocking the ravished host

Still reeds waver in the shimmering heat,  
Giving an illusion of motion  
And the sky speckled with puffs of lethargic clouds  
Looks down with easy nonchalance

White unblemished sand outlines the distant shore  
Like an unreachable silver lining to the despondent landscape  
It stands aloof, mocking the indolent complacency of man  
In the face of hopeless stagnation.

## fiction

# The Ordeal

by Mohit Ul Alam

Continued from last week

THOUGH his thoughts swung back to the breakfast table. His father was silent, and it worried him. The stern face of an old man who regularly drank isubul to ease up his bowels but who ruled his family like a sire buoyed up in his mind. "My father is a different stuff," he submitted.

"Which degree have you completed, Bhaiya?"

Her question sounded as if she were dictated by somebody in her family to prod him with this question.

"I've not taken any degree, and I've decided not to."

At the breakfast table his father as usual headed the table, flanked by his brothers and sisters on both sides. He sat beside his younger brother, who, though younger, had assumed some dominance in the family by virtue of the fact that he had been recently elected the general secretary of his college's student association. It was he who had put the question back to Saileh regarding his newly-found confidence by saying that he didn't think it was enough for anybody in the present world to have a career without graduating.

The girl's face fell.

"How do you mean?" She timidly asked, exactly the same way as his friend, Hamid did.

Hamid was a student reading in the same department as he was. He came from a village in Barisal. While he spoke in a free mixture of English and Bangla, his defective accent aroused laughter, but which most of his classmates were careful enough to suppress lest Hanif was hurt. Hamid was clever in his own way. He used his very disarming smile generously, allowing people to come to him with an open mind. Hamid loved to sing the romantic songs of the olden times. He would sing them with such pathos that his eyes shone with tears. He once confided to him how he managed it with a girl in his village near the bank of their pond. Saileh listened to him wide-eyed, as this experience was something he yearned for. This Hamid also, hearing his decision to quit, cried out in utter surprise, "how do you mean?"

A sister of his came out with some water in a big mug. She intended to sprinkle water on the flower pots in the balcony. She was immediately elder to Saileh. She and Choli were on friendly terms. She asked them laughingly if they were that much engrossed in their conversation as to forget to move away from the sun.

Saileh quickly left his chair, came inside, but Choli stayed there with his sister, talking.

He walked up the dining space to his mother's room, replaced the nail-cutter into her desk. She heard his footsteps from the kitchen, and called to him loudly. He knew his mother was happy. She could never accept the idea of having grown up sons sent to a different city for education. Though she was not very educated, she was aware of the happenings about the universities where students got killed as cheaply as rice grains. Coming to her Saileh felt his inner wound being sprinkled with soft affection. He stood tall at the kitchen door, and lanky. His mother sat on a small plastic stool with her back to the door and was giving instructions to the maid who was scrubbing off the scales of a big rui fish with the help of a heavy chopper. On the double burner the flame burnt blue under a sauce pan in one and an aluminium pan in the other. Knowing her kitchen habits well, Saileh could

guess that his mother was after a special recipe for the lunch.

"What?" he asked, elated.

His mother turned her face. She was in her mid-fifties, fair and strong, and her face was broad, the eyes being set rather wide. Her hair was thick and straight, and bit strongly into the skin on the hairline. As a result, her forehead bore an enormous sign of self-confidence. Her lips were thick, and her chin square. Years of domestic experience have hardened every muscle about her face, and she was indomitable in the face of family crises.

"You should go to the old house for collecting the rent. The bananas on the southeast bank of the pond should be ripe now. Check also if the coconut trees need any cleansing. Tell Sakina's mother I'll go next week. I've kept some money over the desk, take that."

Saileh went back to his room which he shared with his younger brother. He put on his blue trousers, and then thoughtfully glided himself into a white interlock vest in place of a shirt. As he slipped his feet onto his brother's sandals, another thought occurred to him. Crouching down he brought out his trunk from under the bed. He took out a paper-file from it, and, shoving it under his arms, came out of the house.

It was nearly the end of September, and still the sun was like hot lead. He picked an alley relatively shadowy to reach Saileh's house. In his native town, Saileh was the friend available. And he heard that Saileh had made some name as a poet locally. Saileh was at home watching TV. He sat beside Saileh in a sofa. The living room was dainty, and the TV was receiving the pictures well. A cricket match between Pakistan and India was showing live from Sarjah. They did not talk until a whole over was bowled.

"What do I hear all this, that you are leaving the college? What for?" Saileh asked still not taking his eyes off the screen.

"Yes, I left Dhaka, because I found the wastage of time too much for me. Everything is late, and late. In the dining hall you've to wait for an hour or so before you're served. The classes don't often hold. The examination dates are announced, but students press for a deferment, and they're deferred. Then when the campus becomes politically hot the unscheduled closures become a regular feature. The students are the direct victims, but they don't realise it. The teachers also lose efficiency in a great way. I found all that very debilitating — intolerable."

"But you need to have a degree."

Saileh sounded exactly like his younger brother. Saileh also felt that in these two weeks after he had left Dhaka whatever anybody was saying to him, he felt he was being sermonised, as if he had committed a criminal offence.

He explained, "I always thought that everybody had got the same time limit, just the 24 hours — me, you and everybody, even Tagore."

"Well" Saileh yawned. "I don't look at it that way. For me time is nothing continuous, I cannot expect to work twenty-four hours. I work when I like or have to, otherwise I feel pretty good wasting my time away — watching TV or talking."

Saileh yawned once again, this time clasping his two hands behind his head and snapping his fingers.

"Did you not sleep well last night?" A big euphonic sound now came out from his mouth as he yawned again

before venturing: "I work up long hours last night, because this poem was not coming to me until it was very late. Do you want to see?"

Saileh left the room, called out to the maid in the kitchen to bring some refreshment for Saileh. The cricket match had gone for drinks, and the commercials started. The Ericson ad was Saileh's favourite. But it was not there. He was looking for the remote to change the channel when Saileh came back. Behind him the maid came with tea and snacks on a tray. She ritually placed them down on the small table in front of them.

Saileh thrust a sheet of paper to

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him.

As he was reading it, Saileh picked up the remote from the sofa and aimed at the TV to find out some interesting channel, but he was at the same time keenly looking at Saileh from the corner of his eye. "It's not yet final," he said, "I plan to change the ending. I cannot but write in a post-modernist form."

Saileh could only faintly grasp the idea of the poem, but there were some words which he didn't think he ever came across before. But he knew that most of the poems of the day were written like that — strangely unpoetic, all disjointed sentences.

Then he clarified: "You see, when I was going through the turmoil whether I would leave Dhaka or not. I wrote some poems — in a very private way — just sort of jotting down my feelings in poetic lines. I've brought them here for you to take a look."

Saileh warmly said, "Sure, show me."

Saileh went back to his room which he shared with his younger brother. He put on his blue trousers, and then thoughtfully glided himself into a white interlock vest in place of a shirt. As he slipped his feet onto his brother's sandals, another thought occurred to him. Crouching down he brought out his trunk from under the bed. He took out a paper-file from it, and, shoving it under his arms, came out of the house.

He offered the file to him. Saileh quickly opened it and went through the first few poems with a solemn face.

He put the sheets back, folded the file and handed it back to Saileh.

"You don't have poetry in you," he said. "You've to learn the metres."

He gave Saileh a good long look. How carefree he sounded! How extraordinarily buoyant and confident! And at the same time his clean-shaven thick chin made him look conceited. All his friends in Dhaka other than Hamid used to enjoy a kind of superiority over him in all types of conversation. Everyday they used to go to the Nilkhet canteen for evening tea, and when they would trudge back to the hostel, tired and hungry, Saileh would remain inwardly dissatisfied. He secretly begrudged his friends their behaviour with him. And they considered him a friend confused.

Saileh came out from Saileh's house dejected, and mulling over his life thinking whether he had done the right thing by leaving Dhaka. What was he planning to do? To make a name as a poet like Saileh? What he felt in Dhaka was that the academic syllabus was pressing down on him like a mountain, while he did not yet get possession of his seat because a mustaan-student would keep it occupied. He felt his disciplined mind gone shattered, and himself not being anymore able to concentrate on his studies. He felt sort of having too much extra time at his disposal, and, as he was getting slothful and lazy, he

became more restless — as if he had been wasting his precious time for nothing.

The distance from Saileh's house to their old house was about a mile. The sun grew hotter, the vehicles on the road were thinning. Beside a public toilet he found a rickshawalla who sat on the passenger's seat dozing with his head slumped to one side, and his legs spread out to his own seat like a bridge. His white half-shirt, completely soaked in sweat, was open at the chest where a thick bush of hair also bathed in sweat. Though he became aware of Saileh's presence, he only merely half-opened his eyes, mumbling something about where he was willing to go. Saileh told him, but he only agreed with reluctance, and he popped open his eyes and took a long view of the sky above. Then he got down from the rickshaw allowing Saileh to climb up. Saileh pulled over the hood, and the rickshawalla, getting onto his own seat now, thrust his

hand backward to adjust the side-bar of the rickshaw on each side. Soon a climb came up on the road, and the rickshawalla got down dutifully. Saileh asked him if he would get down too, but rickshawalla adamantly signalled with his hand that he remained seated. The pitch was burning hot. The smell was in the air.

His elder brother was happy that he came back. But that was more from the personal gain that he stood to make than from genuine feeling. His father had recently asked him to share Saileh's education expenses. He was crafty at the breakfast table, and merely threw the idea that since there were colleges in Chittagong why should one go to a college in a different city? The rickshaw entered the Battery Lane. The road was narrow and

crowded. Vendors selling vegetables and spinach sat on the edges of the road, blocking the traffic. His rickshaw soon got knotted with a rickshaw coming from the other direction. Both the rickshawallas quickly lost their temper and started a fracas. Saileh got down quickly. Their old house was only a few yards away.

He entered their old house by the back door that opened on a path which wound round the pond and led to the main house. The pond, which was dug materialising his mother's vision of a full-of-fish pond was small and shaded by the banana trees that had grown over the banks, thick green. The house, a two and a half-storied old-fashioned building had been rented out since they had shifted to the new house at Muradpur. The elder brother had calculated that people would not come to that crowded area on higher rents, so he told his father to divide the house into many small dwellings with a set of independent kitchen and bathroom for each. It worked, and none of the houses was out of rent. The pond was used by all the tenants for bathing and washing. The drinking water was collected from a public tap fixed outside their boundary wall. Though the pond was small, his father had enough fancy to erect a cemented ghat that cascaded deep into the water. The top flight of steps was adorned with a pair of cemented settees facing each other, so that people could sit on them and gossip in the afternoon cool. But the settees were not clean, spattered with crow-droppings. So Saileh crouched over the ground rather than sit on the settee. He looked at the trees, his mother's fond things. The coconut trees shot up well above the banana plants, their pinnate leaves combing the air at the slightest hint of a wind. They were quite heavy at the top with full-grown coconuts on every knot. His mother left the house almost against her will.

A woman came out to wash a bowl of rice. She hesitated a moment, but recognising him, she slowly climbed down the steps toward the water.

She looked slightly older than he. He had a momentary glimpse of her face, which was oval, and her eyes which were large. She wore an ash-coloured sari, and no blouse inside. As she landed on the step where the water was ankle-deep, she lifted the lower part of her sari and tucked it between her knees. Saileh saw the shapely cups of her legs, hairless and white, and they immediately reminded him of Hamid and his managing the girl by the pond. He wished he had asked Hamid how to go about it. As he watched the woman bent over water, her sari, ruffled in places, still thinly suggested the cleavage of her behind, but then he turned his eyes away as he sensed the woman had sensed she was being watched. She turned back, gazed at Saileh betraying nothing however. Then she retrieved the steps back and crossed the yard disappearing behind a shed.

Saileh rose, did not pick up his file, but got down the steps until he reached the water. He bent down and cooped up some water in his palms, and brought the water close to his eyes and studied it. The water wore a pale green shade in his palms, though the eye which was near the water reflected in it opaquely. Then he parted his palms so suddenly that the cupped water dropped like a small spongy mass on the surface of the pond. A swarm of tadpoles swam away by the impact but ventured near the steps again as the water quieted down. He dug his

hands into the water again and then gurgled a few times and washed his eyes and face thoroughly. He straightened himself up, surveying around. The green water, the earthen banks, the placid banana trees and their cool shade, the towering coconut trees, and the bubbling stirring of the telapia fish, and the swarms of tadpoles — everything sort of greeted him as one of their old pals. Even the sky above which couldn't have reflected in the soiled water greeted him with the notion of an old acquaintance.

What would he do? This question took the form of an anguish and constantly harrowed him and made his life miserable. This anxiety soon began to tell upon his health, he grew absolutely pale, his fair complexion turned ashen, and soon he began to lose weight. He went to see a homeopath who advised him to desist from masturbating, which he nevertheless continued performing to his great horror as it defied all his virtuous efforts at keeping himself clean. Why did he have to do anything at all! He watched his friends closely, who seemed to live a very happy life — without worries and anxieties. Not that they were less meritorious than he, or less ambitious, but some how they didn't seem to be immensely preoccupied with their goals. He fretted realising that he actually gave more thought to the necessity of doing them. He also felt he had limited potentials.

At the breakfast table the other brother, who was practising law at the sub-judge court, was sort of non-committal. It was not because he hadn't thought about the matter but because he had such immense confidence in the wisdom of his father that he would not express his opinion until he understood what his father thought about the matter.

Saileh's father had a ritualistic approach towards food. As he was a man of clean habits, his eating preferences were selective. He avoided all fat items, and instead of tea he drank a glass of horlicks at breakfast. The isubul mixture seemed apparently to have worked the reverse way, not helping him much, and, on the other hand, having his bowels loosened up at the wrong time. He felt he was becoming dysenteric. His mother often exhorted him saying that too much caution with food was destroying his digestive power. His father would smile contentedly, as if his secret desire to succeed as a stoic were satisfied with the comment.

In Dhaka when his nights literally turned into an exercise of having to toss over in bed without sleep, something in him one early morning, kind of an inner voice, pushed him and said, "Leave".

"Leave what," he cried out.

"Leave this place, go back to your mother."

He told his room-mate, who was also a good friend of his, that he planned to leave the college. At breakfast all of his other friends came to know about his decision. And after more than two years, Saileh came back home without a degree. His father was sitting at the dining table working on his law papers. His face showed total dismay as he saw Saileh entering through the door of the front room dragging a big black trunk which he borrowed from his room-mate. It was almost evening, and the crows outside chorused loudly. But inside the light was not still put on, but he could still his father's face, until and depressed. For the first time since his leaving Dhaka did he taste something close to defeat.