The Daily Star

LITERATURE

Syed Ali Ahsan (1919-2002)

My East Bengal, is like a wondrous cool river

What an amazingly cool river is my East Bengal How quiet and again how gay In sudden overflowing abandon. Once loud and noisy Many a time sleepy and lethargic: At other times A continuous flood of subdued voice. You are bottomless In the overflowing water of monsoon. A heaven of generous heart A wide expanse of life Stretching beyond the horizon. Agreeting like the boat Swimming onward with sweeping current Like the full-throated song of the boatman Singing with abandon From his perch upon the bow.









FICTION

Seventeen Hawks and a White Horse

Raihan Raeen is one of the promising young writers of Bangla short stories. With him we dive into the pool of our cultural memory, we listen to the story that is our history. His camera eye panned the Jhaochar area to give us a sense of motion, a motion of the hawks and the horses, which ultimately becomes the motion of humans for whom dream and reality are but one.

FTER seven long years thinks them to be an illusion, and when Nazim Fakir's white goes on to wash his face in the river horse returns to Jhaochar water but is afraid to see his own grotesque reflection. In the river he one full-moon night, we see Nazim Fakir's white horse at the south part sees a sailboat floating aimlessly, of the neighbourhood tied to its and scores of upturned pitchers too. usual post of the date tree in which The hawks are still flying over his head. In total there are seventeen of clay pots are hung for juice collection. A lot of stories of Jhaochar them, and the significance of the number suddenly creeps his mind suddenly come to life. When we get and he opens his closed eyes to find down from the boat for the first time eleven bodies of eleven dacoits on at Bairan's bank, the deflected the water of Chardakatia. He sunrays from the glass designs of notices the body of Maeez- the thief, Purbashukpur's Kazem Ali's markilled in the swamp of Gahar bled grave dazzle us. To our sur-Chandra of Ramura, in the same prise, we see Nazim Fakir heading posture that it has been first seen southward riding on his white horse lving across the aisles of the field along the banks of Bairan. He with its chopped shoulder and its crosses the Jhaochar and moves folded loose skins on the forehead southwest towards Sukdevpur, amid the slightly crimson water. where he is going to cross the beels North of Bhramagachha, the body of Bhramagacchha Gudaraghaat, of Uzir Dacoit is caught in the fishing and then perhaps cross the river to net, who is killed by a hot rod forcibly move along further west. But he pushed through his anus, and the never makes his horse run even one who has done it is Mongla. though he is attempting such a Mongla's hand starts shivering from distance. Maybe it is because of his the moment he pushes through the blindness or maybe of some other rod and it continues until the hand reason that we do not know. The finally dries up and remains loosely villages next to Jhaochar like connected to the arm joint. Mozaher Sukdevpur, Bhurungamari, stops after counting up to thirteen. Shimulkanda, Chalteydangaa, His memory falls short of figuring Beripotol have never seen Nazim out why there has been seventeen. Fakir begging. The number of He tries to remember Ramzan beggars in this part of the country is Joaddar of Bagbati, whose truna little too many, and besides there cated head now starts rolling are very few houses that actually towards him. First the headless body then the head, then it is just the can afford to give alms. But Nazim Fakir hasn't bought this horse just to head with no sign of the body anygo to places and seek alms. The where. That night he loses his way horse simply takes him for a ride on back from the marketplace of its back and eventually finds its way Shonamukhi and makes seven or back to his home. There is nobody eight loops round the Shatgharia's else who can do that. There has Beel. Caught in the vortex of a nightmare, he cannot find his way been Ekabbar though. Ekabbar, the out until it finally dawns. On another one who sobs sitting under the night, when he and two of his men Chhatim tree next to the date tree have gone for collecting honey from on the south part of the village. the hives with smoke torch in hands, There is no sign of habitation when the seventeen hawks begin to one looks further south of Ekabbar. chase him and he faints after com-The emptiness on his south clings ing to the side of Sharafat Dewan's to his chest like a weary load. And pond. The commotion makes the when he cries, he just keeps on one who has been on the top of tree crying: weeping and wailing. He to climb down leaving the hives cries until it is night, until things are alone. This man comes up with a no longer seen. It is quite a hassle to brilliant idea of bringing Mozaher to take Ekabbar along; he is sure to his senses, much to the fun of the make a nuisance with his cries. curious mob. The smells of the When Ekabbar is calm, he curves charred garlic and turmeric bring his finger through the dust and senses of Mozaher who immedidraws human figures with bags, ately resorts to a round of unspeakcranes that are flying, yoked-cows able words. Mozaher has not lost that are ploughing the fields and so his senses. We, those who have forth. Nobody is afraid of Ekabbar at been present, then understand the that time, although he possesses a hidden meaning of his fainting when machete. Everybody knows that he he begins to utter words in the tone carries the machete for giving of Ramzan Joaddar. In his apparent shape to the bamboo. With bamboo senseless talks he mentions leaves, he makes hat, with bamboo Satgharia's Beel that makes us sticks he makes fish pots, mouth remember the accidental death of caps and food containers for cattle, Ramzan Joaddar. Lending voice and vegetable baskets. Nobody from Mozaher, Ramzan Joaddai knows where he has learnt all the begins to scold him, and the holy verses of the tree climber or even of craftsmanship. Quite an event it has been when this Ekabbar dies of a Elahi Box have little effect on the stomach fever. The wails of talker so we call on Tasher Prana. Tasher Prang comes with a lantern Ekabbar's mother draw a huge crowd to the house of Nazim Fakir and a pot of water. He chants holy even in an overcast day. Tasher words, spreads them in the air and puts them in the pot, and then Prang holds a thread in front of Ekabbar's nose. The thread sprinkles the water on Mozaher. We then see Mozaher or Ramzan remains still and Prang declares Joaddar wriggling and hissing towards Tasher Prang with futile Ekabbar to be dead. The grave is dug right beneath the Chhatim tree. aggression, and then finally surren-Wrapped in a shroud Ekabbar's dering to the constant sprinkles of body is carried towards the grave water. He slams his own body, tries with rhythmic chanting of holy to run, talks nonsense, but then verses. Nazim Fakir has already stops doing them, and Mozaher, or returned and Ekabbar's mother has Ramzan Joaddar in him, goes into a continued to cry. The body is laid to slumber. This same Tasher Prang the ground with the four holy verses, has once told us that he has been but even before his father can climb once gathering mustard seeds in a up out of the grave pit, the walls of moonlit night at Burir Chak when a the grave collapses all of a sudden. couple of headless bodies wrapped Those who are present stare at one in shroud begin to do the same. He simply leaves the place right there another with baffled amazement. The oldest of the old, Kancha with the sack of mustard seeds on Prang, in his ever-placid voice says his back. He comes to the south part "Dig a new one." The new grave is of Burir Chak where Nikticharan's dug under a Bel tree. The moment wife has been cremated. There he Ekabbar is lowered into this new pit, sees the flock of hawks, and one of the unthinkable happens. Ekabbar them, a large one, begins to chase stirs, and those who have been him. For an avid medicine man like lowering the body leap out of the pit Prang, it has been real easy to in sheer shock. Everybody sees capture the hawk with his spell of that Ekabbar is shaking off the dirt chants in and put it in an empty and trying to sit inside the grave. cage. That night a strange dream visits Prang; he hears, "Somebody After this incident, Ekabbar has lived for another five good years. is stealing away your white horse. Somehow, the matter has got rid of He jumps up of his bed and takes his habit of crying. But it has also the dusty roads and tracks in search silenced him to a great extent. of the thief but suddenly remembers that he does not have any horse. In the gale and fog when in the southern part of the village we see When he gets back home, he is all Nazim Fakir's white horse tied to the shaking. He opens the cage and date trees where the clay pots for releases the hawk juice-collection are hung, we think In the wintry night of Maagh when of the seventeen hawks that hover we warm ourselves by the bonfire of over Nazim Fakir's house. One of dried grass then Nazim Fakir's horse that has returned neighs to them once chases Mozaher, the remind us of the carefully preserved man living couple of houses away from Nazim Fakir's, out of the riverwater pitcher of Bashi's mother. Bashi's father Idris Ali has been in bank to his house. That night his deathbed when the water Mozaher starts acting strangely and the whole village throngs before his pitcher of that room begins to move on its own. Idris Ali's brother, Nazim house. Mozaher has been in frenzy Fakir, being blind, fails to take note much to the fun of the crowd. He attempts to run away from everyof the stirring but it does not escape Rasul Box's eyes who has been thing, but is forcibly tied by the crowd with heavy jute ropes notsitting right next to the dying man. withstanding his strength that has The thirsty souls rebel inside the suddenly increased sevenfold. water pitcher and it breaks the heart of Makbul's father. Haran Mia. to Some even sprinkle water from the know that. He suddenly cries out nearby well to cool him down. It is aloud which make others think that Mozaher who once delays to return Bashi's father has died, but death home after selling his jute in the actually pays its visit a little later. marketplace of Shonamukhi. The After his funeral, when the mournplace is all the way down if you take ing has died down, Bashi's mother the trodden path by the banks of Chardakatia River, west of Kuralia carefully cleans the water pitcher and carefully places it on the bamand left of Gharia's Beel. The moment he reaches the riverbank, boo rack, reminding us of the boys who have come from Ektala with he hears the fluttering of the hawks. poles decorated with clothes and He raises his eyes to see them. He

ground.

party perhaps. Inside the palki, hairy wigs in one of the hot summer days of Baishakh or Jaishtha leadthere are the mother and her newing the fearsome looking troop of born, born in its granny's house. stick fighters. These men from They are now returning to their Ektala, Shukdevpur and Jhaochar house at Jhaochar. A band of snake head towards the Rishibari. By the charmers come with their baskets, well of Rishibari where dung is water gypsies come with their mixed with water. Khagenchandra merchandise, and the bird-hunters draws a circle in his vard and takes come with their catapults, and also up his slaughtering axe and hit his come the bedlam. After the reaping, clowns like Ramdilip and Ashoks own body over and again. He then picks up dusts and chants holy come from Purvasukdevpur to spells and covers his wounds and Jhaochar with the idol of Durga to we do not see any blood coming of take part in the ceremonies. In the his body. When the stick fight full moon of Kartik, many from begins, this very Khagen beats up Ektala, Shimulkanda, Shukdevpur Idris Ali, rather Bashi's father. With take the streets to enjoy the play of every blow the whole crowd breaks Behula and Lakhinder. The iron caged marriage bed made by into outcries excepting the people of Viswakarma, the canoe made of Jhaochar, and when Idris shows his tongue pierced with a huge hook and moves about the encircled moon floating down the Kalidaha. the snake beaten body of Lakhindar border with frantic dance, the crowd attended by Behula in the raft jeers at him. People at Jhaochar do makes the moon drift to the edges of not think that Idris Ali does all these the night, reminding us of the old haggard Shankaburi who has been with the stick only for his passion but also for Madarthe one with strange waiting for her son for twelve years. curly hairdowho has an eye on him. Like sneaking into one story from another, we dive into the pool of Or else, why will one bear the pole with decorated clothes and wigs to memory to think of the drowned excite him? After all, Idris is not the man Bakul's father. Such reminisonly stick player in that area. Still, cence opens up the citadels of the Madar's eyes are on him. Is it palace inhabited by monsters. because he gets defeated in the When Badiuzzaman takes away the stick game over and again? But grass from the tiger's grip and offers losing is not the same with Madar. it to the goat and removes the meat After Bashi is born, his mother from the goat's face to give it to the dreams of a man in white robe, who tiger, the door opens, causing an identifies himself as Khoaz Khizir, uneasy chill sweep our mind. and wants to bless the newborn and Although the captive princess is asks her to leave a red thread in one rescued, in some other part, somecorner of the house. Bashi's mother one in the garden of heaven realises the significance of her searches for the bakoali flower and dream and finds one such red string falls into the trap of the mysterious in her bundle and places it as princess: while six of the seven instructed before she goes to sleep. brothers is outplayed by the prin-In the morning, she finds a piece of cess in the game of dice and is paper with Arabic scripts written on finally imprisoned, the last one it tied to the red string. After that we thinks of his mother. We then forget have see that red thread tied around of the sea that swallows those Bashi's arms for a long time. merchant's ships and the white elephants that roam about the

When Bashi's mother dies she is rested under the Jiga tree right next to her husband's grave, and Bashi makes it his dwelling place as well. He raises a hut in that next to the graves and when the villagers wonder what he is eating in that place, they go only to find that Bashi has been growing potatoes and gourds in the field by the burial

While bringing down the clay pots from the date tree where Nazim Fakir's horse is tied, we think of the way Nazim Fakir's dead body arrives from Dhunat and are reminded of Ali Akbar Peer. After becoming his disciple, Nazim Fakir practices to look first at the moon on the corner of the lips of Sharafat then at the sun in his attempt to get Dewan. He caresses his white the divine power of his master. When his brother dies after being heaten to death by his in-Kangaldashpur, Nazim Fakir fails to recognise the body. He loses his sight for looking so much at the sun and the moon and is reproached by Ali Akbar Peer for acting in such a way. Night falls like the darkness of Nazim Fakir's eyes as we see a group of man with torches running towards the Bairan across the field. Their song: "Maler ful, Tiler ful/Masha gelo ganger kul" as well as their torch procession drives the mosquitoes away all the way down to the Bairan. And the boys pelt stones at the trees to drive away the ghosts. Those who come out of Akbar Peer's house on Thursday, the pitch-dark moonless night makes them see of the shadowy image of Akbar Peer's ancestors. All the high grave stones become mysterious than ever, and people of Jhaochar takes it to heart that those who are lying in those graves still venture out of their resting places and can return in persons from the land of the dead. The man who can make the dead alive is surely a man of a different world, standing on the threshold of life and death. When Akbar Ali Peer holds his religious meeting, a strange smell of the rose fills the air and we experience a slice of divinity and longs to touch Ali Akbar Peer's turban at least for once. The vanished clouds of Baishakh returns in more fierce and dark shapes, making a gust of untimely wind blow crazily through Bairan, Jhaochar. Shimulkanda just the way the canines or diseases beguiled as a woman in white veils run from village to village to create havoc in the days of cholera and poxes. The air becomes a messenour mind as we head towards ger of death and diseases. Drought or flood, it doesn't matter. It's all in the air and people of Jhaochar can sniff and tell. When the flood protection barrage collapses, people of Jhaochar finds themselves relocated on the East Side of the road. When the dead are floated in rafts. we remember Lakhindar, yet know that the casualties of hunger and diseases are higher than those of snakebites. When the water resides, epidemics strike the cattle Khagen, Nitai, Baidya, Nittcharan of Rishibari roam the streets with knives and compete among themselves to skin the dead animals. The foxes and the dogs join the feast over the meat of the skinned animals lying on the wayside under the circling vultures. When the monsoon subsides and the south wind begins to blow over Jhaochar, a group of men gets down from the sailboats with musical band and a palki to take part in a

POETRY

From Kirtinasha

MOHAMMAD RAFIQ

an arching ashshaora leans over a canal why does it lean so does it know?

a vine hangs down binding branch to branch why does it hang so does it know?

a flock cries out and scatters bird by bird why does it cry out so does it know?

burning shadows stretch across field after field their stench scorched and coppery

soldering leaf to leaf the sunstruck chaitra sky lights its own pyre

but why just so does it know? sharp-sheathed reeds recklessly crack and shatter

the wind chases itself in breathless play why does it run so and die does it know?

all these awkward scribblings what's the point? cranes drink their fill and fly away, tame geese head back to their pens, their weary wanderings make meaningless lines a smeared scrawl

stretched across the sand as the sun sinks into the marshes beyond the prosaic waves on the river's furthermost bend slipping into the dusk, silhouetted, obscure

murderous enemies slowly haul in their dark conspiratorial net hand over hand closeted whispers leak across stagnant waters flattening blanched reeds, startling the parched grass

dumbstruck night grips the moorings, villages, towns these stories of new life are just tall tales, empty talk mountains, plains springs, and stretching tamarisk is there any other destiny, Kirtinasha?

Translated by Carolyn Brown

in history THIS WEEK

July 27

1824: Alexandre Dumas, fils (La Dame aux Camelias), is born in Paris. 1962: In Sury-en-Vaus, France, English writer and editor Richard Aldington dies. His best work of fiction is Death of a Hero (1929), followed by the sequel, All Men Are Enemies (1933), both reflect the disillusionment of a generation that had fought through World War I. 1916: American novelist, short-story writer, and essayist best known for her eloquent literary and social criticism, Elizabeth Hardwick, is born in Lexington, Kentucky.

1947: Kathleen Norris is born in Washington, DC, but her childhood summers in Lemmon, South Dakota, will provide material for her first award-winning best-seller, Dakota: A Spiritual Geography

July 28

1667: Abraham Cowley dies in Chertsey, Surrey, at 48, and is buried in Westminster Abbey. 1750: In Carcassonne, France, Fabre d'Eglantine is born. First an actor, he will later become a poet, best known for his song, "Il pleut, il pleut, bergère," still sung by French children today. 1814: Percy Bysshe Shelley, already married to the former Harriet Westbrook, elopes to France with Mary Wollstonecraft (Godwin).

1844: Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jesuit poet "The Wreck of the Deutschland" is born in Stratford, Essex

1864: English actor, poet, and dramatist, remembered mainly for his play Paolo and Francesca (1900), Stephen Phillips is born in Summertown, Oxfordshire. His first collection of poetry. Poems, will be published in 1897

1866: Children's writer and illustrator Beatrix Potter (The Tale of Peter Rabbit) is born in Bolton Gardens, Kensington.

1909: Novelist and poet Malcolm Lowry (Under the Volcano) is born in Birkenhead, Cheshire England.









Rahman Peer's house at Shukdevpur at that night The distant melody of drums and flutes and jingle bells fills the air of the night, and standing in his premises of Abdur Rahman Peer we can still distinguish the sounds from the religious songs of the peer's followers. However, under the half-lit night, from a distance we cannot really discern the words that are written on the canopy that covers the house. We mix with the crowd. The open grave scares away lot of people that probably reminds them of their own future. When the sounds of the bell carry the night almost towards dawn, Abdur Rahman is wrapped in a shroud and then is lowered into the grave pit with enough supply of fruits and water. We shiver in the cold of the night and look at the muddy mound over the grave in fear, and the next morning an untimely cloud covers the sky and gusty wind blows over Jhaochar. People who have seen earlier the seventeen hawks flying over Shatgharia's Beel once again see them through the storm shower; daring the thunder and lightening the hawks revel and rejoice. When the moon finally comes out tearing the veil of the cloud, Shankaburi sees the moon cleft in twain all over again. A swollen body surfaces in the waters of Bairan and somebody proposes to raise Abdur Rahman from the grave and lay that body to rest instead. This reminds us of the return of the white horse of Nazim Fakir but does not totally unfold the mystery why the horse has delayed for seven long years, even if it has survived the lightning that has killed Nazim Fakir. Why does not the horse remember its master for the whole time? The mystery swirls in

Jhaochar, our attention is drawn to

the old tamarind tree of Tasher

Prang lying in midst of bushes and

shrubs. In the full moon light we see

some boys dancing on the fallen

tree and plucking tamarinds. Their

long necks make us laugh, but we

soon realise that they are not from

this world, and their heads are

actually flying way above their

bodies. Before we can make sense

of this, there, by the ditch, we see

Sharafat Dewan riding the white

horse of Nazim Fakir. He doesn't

see us but we see him crystal clear

in that bright moonlight: his white

hair and his white beard. Dewan

Sharafat is heading north riding the

Translated from Bangla by Shamsad Mortuza

horse of Nazim Fakir.

jungle and go for hunting ducks by

the river Bairan. The sun by then

has aged further after returning

from the land of the ducks, and the

fog has begun to blanket the ducks

that have made their appearances

in Jhaochar. In one of these days,

we see the long lost Sharafat

Dewan donned in white hair and

The saga of the octogenarian

recounts his travel to the lands of

Rama and Ravana enthralls us. But

then we hear of Abdur Rahman

Peer declaring his plan to make a

pilgrimage to a grave for seven

days. The news brings a wry smile

beards while we people at Abdur

beards returning to Jhaochar,

July 29

1805: Statesman and writer Alexis de Tocqueville is born in Paris. After a two-year stay in the United States, he will publish Democracy in America (1835-40).

1869: Novelist Booth Tarkington is born in Indianapolis, Indiana. He will win the Pulitzer Prize twice: for The Magnificent Ambersons and Alice Adams.

1878: American newspaperman, poet, and playwright, creator of the literary characters Archy the cockroach and Mehitabel the catwry, down-and-out philosophers of the 1920sDon Marguis is born in Walnut, Illinois.

1900: In Svartbjörnsbyn, Sweden, working-class novelist Eyvind Johnson is born. He will bring new themes and points of view to Swedish literature as well as experiment with new forms and techniques. He will share the 1974 Nobel Prize with fellow Swede Harry Edmund Martinson

1918: Novelist Edwin O'Connor (The Last Hurrah) is born in Providence, Rhode Island, 1974: German writer of popular children's books, Erich Kät;stner, dies in Munich. The most famous of his children's booksnoted for their humor and respect of the child's moral seriousnessEmil und die Detektive (Emil and the Detectives), has been dramatized and filmed several times. (RP)

July 30

1771: Thomas Gray ("Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard") dies at 54, in Cambridge. 1818: Emily Jane Brontë is born in Thomton, Yorkshire, the younger sister of Patrick Branwell Brontë, who becomes the model for the dissipated Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights. Emily will comment: "If I could I would work in silence and obscurity, and let my efforts be known by their results."

1894: In Oxford, Walter Pater dies, but the influence of his style and ideas continues.

July 31

1703: For having written The Shortest Way with Dissenters, Daniel Defoe is made to stand in the pillory in front of Temple Bar, drawing sympathetic crowds who pelt him with flowers instead of mud.

1843: William T. Lowndes (The Bibliographer's Manual of English Literature) dies in impecunious circumstances in London.

1843: Peter Rosegger, Austrian poet and novelist (Die Schriften des Waldschulmeisters), is born near Krieglach, Styria.

August 1

1819: Herman Melville is born in New York.

1899: Canadian poet and influential promoter of his country's poetry, Francis Reginald Scott, is born in Quebec. He will also write nonfiction concerning socialism and constitutional law, and serve as a United Nations representative in Myanmar.

1991: Yusuf Idris, Egyptian playwright and novelist, dies in London, England. In the Eye of the Beholder: Tales of Egyptian Life (1978) and Rings of Burnished Brass (1984), are two works published in English translation.

August 2

1963: American poet whose verse is characterized by introspection and intense lyricism Theodore Roethke dies in Bainbridge Island, Washingtor

1869: Irving Babbitt, critic and teacher, leader of the movement in literary criticism known as New Humanism, is born in Dayton, Ohio. He will be educated at Harvard and the Sorbonne, and gather T.S. Eliot and George Santayana as followers

1914: Japanese playwright and leader in the attempt to revitalize the post-World War II theater, Junji Kinoshita, is born in Tokyo.

1924: James Baldwin is born in Harlem Hospital, New York City.

1933: Spanish-born novelist who will write in French, Machel del Castillo, is born in Madrid. He will become famous at 24 with the short novel, Tanguy (Child of Our Time), which, like The Diary of Anne Frank, told with the poignancy of a child's witness to cruel historical events, tells of his actual experiences as a political refugee and a prisoner in concentration camps.

1955: Wallace Stevens, first trained as a lawyer, then becoming vice president for an insurance firm, a position he will hold until this day, dies. His first book of poetry, Harmonium (1923), sold fewer than 100 copies, but many of his best poems are found in the work. His **1954:** Collected Poems earned him the Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

1963: Oliver La Farge dies in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

1980: American humorist, actor, playwright, Academy Award-winning screenwriter, Donald Stewart, dies in London, England.

Source: Internet