

SHORT STORY**The Dying Sun*****SYED AFZAL HAIDER**

Les Balance, a friend from my college days, arrives in town from Berkeley on a hot Thursday in July, to attend a three-day conference on intestinal disorders. I pick him up from the arrival gate of Continental Airlines. Les jumps into the front as we drive off.

"Do not cry over me while I live, or after my death," says Les, putting on his seat belt.

"What is it?" I ask, "altitude sickness or a California high?"

"Neither," he says with a mischievous smile. "We are all Bodhisattvas of our own selves and we have to keep returning to this material world until we have achieved enlightenment."

"Is that why you've arrived today?" I ask.

"I am serious," he says, laughing. "When all our issues are resolved we attain Nirvana."

"In life, logical thinking is not necessary," he continues. "Only the acceptance of 'what's happening' or 'what has happened' leads one to peace and tranquility."

Looking away from the road and turning towards Les, I snap, "A man without a woman, I can understand, but a child without a mother, I cannot accept." Looking back at the road again, I say "Peace and tranquility, how dull."

"Let me tell you about this obese woman," he says, changing the subject. "She came to see me with infected intestines. Every time she moved, she exploded like a horse."

"Did Dr. Balance have a cure for her?"

"Some of us are more accepting," he says amused with himself. "Medicine does not have cures for all our ailments. We referred her to Outpatient Psychiatry."

"During my dinner with Les and Marty at Matsuya, Marty looks sad. Nothing works, I think, and drink too much California Chablis."

"I find life very sad," says Marty. "Not so much my own life. I mean life itself is sad. Everyone I know is dying. My father may die two weeks from now, or

several years later. The fact is we are all dying."

There is a pause. Marty is getting too serious, I think. There is nothing to say. Besides, I agree. Life is too short to ponder a subject like this. I take my first big bite of Ika with plenty of wasabi.

"That's why Dylan turned to Jesus," says Les. "To be born again."

"I find no need to believe in anything," says Marty. "It's the meaninglessness of life that makes me sad."

I don't know what to say. I have to rush home. I keep wondering about the White Sox. I turn to Marty, my eyes teary from too much wasabi and we both start laughing.

When Les and I arrive home, Adam is still up. Dressed in his pyjamas, he is sitting with Sylvia, the babysitter, at the kitchen table drinking hot chocolate. The TV sitting on the kitchen counter is on. "Sox won," announces Adam.

"I know," I say, taking a bottle of St Pauli Girl Dark from the refrigerator. Les declines one. "I am sorry, I don't have any California Coolers," I say, smiling.

"Never mind," says Les, sitting beside Adam. "I don't need to drink to feel better."

Sylvia smiles and gets up from her chair. "Let's go to your room," she says to Adam. "I'll read you a bedtime story."

Adam looks at me. I nod my head. He gets up from his chair and gives me a kiss.

"Can I get one too?" asks Les. "No," says Adam with a smile. He walks over and gives Les a kiss. "Come and see me in Berkeley," Les says. "I'll take you to the Golden Gate Bridge."

Adam says nothing. He walks away holding Sylvia's hand. Stopping at the mid-stair landing, he says, "Daddy, don't forget to kiss me goodnight before you go to sleep."

"I won't," I say, taking a sip of my beer.

"I am with her though she has left me," says our hero in a made-for-TV movie.

"You love them and you leave them," I say. I get up and turn off the TV.



"It's easy for you to say," says Les. "You live in self-exile."

I walk back and sit down beside him. "You should talk. A new marriage every second child or three years. Whichever comes first."

"I need a woman in my life to feel complete," say Les. "Besides, I am not the issue here."

I say nothing. Les continues. "It's been four years now since Susanna died, and you live like nothing has happened, like she is going to come back on the next flight."

"It's been only three years, I want to shout. But who is counting?"

"Quite the contrary," I say. "I live like someone has died and nothing will ever be the same."

"Yeah, yeah," say Les, nodding his head. "I see more pictures of Susanna hanging on the walls now than when she was living."

"You don't need photographs on the walls if the person is living, I was about to say, but I am quiet. Shaking his head, Les

says, "One has to go on living in the face of death."

"My mother used to say," I respond, "'To remember me by, you should say your prayers every day, provide for the needy, and be kind to your father.'" I look out the kitchen window at the dark. "Except for the child," I say, "Susanna left no instructions."

"It happens every day. Children lose mothers. It just turns out to be your story."

"Yeah, to you it's a story," I say sharply.

"Contemplate, but do not question," says Les in a calm voice. "Acceptance is the way. You don't need anybody's permission to enjoy life."

"Now I see why you no longer smoke dope," I say. "California living suits you. You are high on life."

"I'm done preaching," says Les, getting up. "Maybe I'll read Adam a bedtime story." He walks upstairs.

I sit in the kitchen aimlessly reading the morning paper. I hear Sylvia walk downstairs, but

I stay busy with yesterday's news. Sylvia says goodbye and leaves.

"Facts about the universe," Les reads to Adam, sitting next to him in his bed. "Scientists expect our universe to go on as it has for at least another forty billion years, when all the hydrogen will finally be used up in making new stars. The last star will shine and go out. Our universe will become dark, cold, and lifeless."

"Are you sad," asks Adam, "that one day there will no longer be a sun?"

"Not really," says Les. "Why not?" Adam asks.

"Forty billion years is a mighty long time. We'll all be dead by then," says Les. "And life will go on in one form or another."

"I have a shield that'll protect them," says Adam. "I am not going to die—never."

Les kisses him goodnight, and walks to the guest room. Adam is lying on his bed, looking at pictures in a space book when I walk in. "Are you sad that one day our sun is

going to die?" asks Adam.

"Yes, I am," I say. "Will you be dead then?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say absently.

"I'll protect you," he says. "I have a shield."

"That will be nice," I say, sitting down on his bed.

"Les has read me a story," he says. "Will you lie down with me and just tell me a short story?"

"Yes," I say, lying down beside him.

"Once there was a magnificent king and his vivacious queen," I begin. "They lived happily, and they grew old together. And one morning they both did not wake up from their sleep. And that's the end of the story."

"That was the shortest story I've ever heard," he says. "Tell me another."

"I'll tell you my favourite story," I say. "I can't remember who told me this story or what makes it my favourite. There once was a kind farmer, I start. His name was Krishna. One year from spring to fall there was no rain, not even a single wandering drop. It was the worst drought ever. All of Krishna's land dried up like a potter's fired pots. He had no money. His wife Sita couldn't bear him a child, and his elderly parents were losing their sight."

"What does losing sight mean?" asks Adam.

"Not being able to see," I say, "with the passage of time."

"Am I going to be blind?" he asks.

"No."

"How can you tell?"

"It's hereditary. Like the chances of getting bald," I say. "I won't mind being bald," he says, shaking his head. "I would be able to see my mommy."

"I want to see her, too," I say. "I just want to see if she is 'kay' 'kay,' he says. The wind rustles against the skylight.

"Are all dead people 'kay' 'kay?' he asks.

"I would like to think so," I say. "We have to live with what we've got."

"Yeah, and with what we don't got," says Adam.

"We can miss her," I say

quietly.

"And we can be sad about it." "It passes," I say. "What about Krishna?"

"One day, a black witch appeared and knocked on his door. "You have been a kind person," said the black witch to Krishna when he opened the door. "I shall grant you one wish."

"Only one wish?" asks Adam, sounding disappointed.

"Yes," I say.

"So what did Krishna ask for?"

"Krishna wished that his parents could see his son eat on plates made of gold."

"That was clever," says Adam. "Yeah," I say, smiling. "Krishna was a wise man."

I lie in Adam's bed until he falls asleep. I kiss him on the forehead before retiring to my room.

I dream that the Beatles are playing. Pete Best is on the drums. John and Paul are singing 'In My Life' for a farewell concert at Ringo's funeral when George walks on to the stage. There is a loud applause that wakes me up. I want to close my eyes and hear the Beatles sing 'Long and Winding Road.' I hear Adam cry. I get out of my bed and walk to Adam's room.

"I don't want to dream anymore," says Adam with his eyes closed.

"What are you dreaming about?" I ask.

"About you," he says, turning to his side.

"What about me?" I ask.

There is no answer. Adam is asleep again. I sit down on his bed. In a dim yellow light filtering through the skylight, I see the titles of the books sitting on the bookshelf. Stuffed among his books is a model kit for a 1932 Ford 'Victoria'. I reach out and pick it up. I hold the unopened, cellophane-wrapped box in my hand for a moment, wondering if I should spend the later hours of the night putting 'Vicky' together. I laugh at the thought and put the box back on the shelf.

I hear Adam talk in his sleep. Just like Susanna used to do, he kicks his covers off. I get up, cover him, and walk out of his room.

I lie down on my bed until the grey dawn arrives. With my eyes wide open, I think of different endings to my story, using the same beginning, same middle, and the same sequence of events. But I can't figure out how to connect the happenings with the end, or the end with the beginning. I think of getting up, taking a long shower, and saying Fajr prayers like my mother used to do every morning, but then decide against it. I don't want to shock the soul of my deceased mother.

I drive Les to the airport. Adam comes along for the ride. Sitting in the back seat, Adam asks Les, "Are you sad that you're leaving?"

"I am going to miss you," Les replies.

"I think Les didn't answer the question."

On the way back from the airport, Adam says he is sad. He cries most of the way back.

"When I was a little boy," I say, trying to comfort him, "every time someone left, I thought 'I'd never see that person again. I still feel that way, but I know better.'"

"But you saw them again," says Adam.

"Yeah," I say, looking at the setting sun.

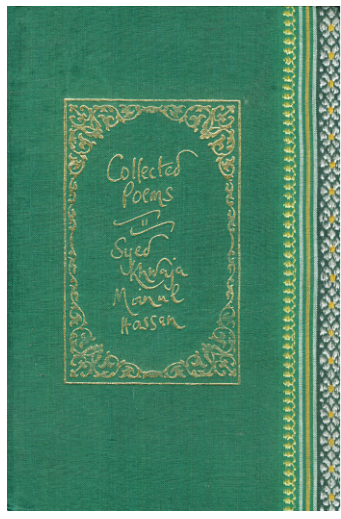
"Why did you feel that way?"

"I don't know," I say. "Feelings are hard to explain. Besides, there are very few explanations to our 'whys'."

"I know," he says quietly, looking away. The pale yellow sun is setting. "I am sad that the sun is going to die one day," he says.

"Yeah," I say absently. "The thought of having no sun does bother me."

*Reprinted from *A Letter from India: contemporary short stories from Pakistan*, Delhi: Penguin India, 2005, written originally in English. Syed Afzal Haider was born in Jhansi. After moving to the US, he started writing in the 1980s, and is now co-editor of the Chicago Quarterly Review.

Book Reviews

Collected Poems of Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan; Kolkata: A Writers Workshop Redbird Book, 2003.

FAKRUL ALAM

Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan, a Bangladeshi who is Associate Professor of English at Claflin University, South Carolina, has authored five books of verse. It is not surprising, then, to find the *Collected Poems of Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan* now in print and it is pleasing to read his verse in this very readable Writers Workshop edition.

Hassan's poetry is distinctive because he writes with a passion born out of a historical sense that sets him apart from most poets writing in English from our part of the world. No doubt inspired by W. B. Yeats, on whom he was to write his doctoral dissertation, in his first volume of verse, *Between Barbed Wires* (1977), Hassan meditates on things falling apart - a world where mere anarchy is loosened upon the world. Or as he puts it in "Between Barbed Wires," the first poem of the *Collected Poems*, "The days are terrible and parlous/And the nights awful and fearful." In "Dhaka 1971", Hassan can barely contain his disgust at the scenes of horror he witnesses: "Filthy joints full of hogs./ Khaki serpents, querulous apes./ Crying vultures and barking dogs/ All in arson, loot and rape." Hassan's second volume, *Inner Edge* continues to record the nightmares of history in emotion-

soaked verse. But more often than not these early poems are too scarred by the scenes of genocide, assassinations, arson, and state terrorism he has read about or witnessed to be first-rate political poetry.

The early poems, I am suggesting, are intemperate and at times too close to rant and too emotional to be good poetry. The hurt is very much there, as is the personal intensity, in Hassan's third volume of poems, *Ashes and Sparks*, but now we see him trying to temper his emotions somewhat. Which is to say, there is more art in these poems and less raw emotion to rankle poetry lovers.

However, though the title poem, "Ashes and Sparks", begins by suggesting that the poet is going to be "calm" and retreat into his own private universe of hurt inflicted by the "ashes and sparks, bombs and bullets/[of] this blood-soaked [twentieth] century of ours", Hassan's exasperation with America's first invasion of Iraq and the Bush Sr. government's manipulation of the United Nations, among other things, is obvious in lines such as: "I will give you hell in a flicker of fire" or "America your Armada is in the wrong Gulf/America come home your house is on fire/ There is a lot of smoke in the basement/Where your children spend the night opening coffins/like crates". The first of these two lines, of course, suggests Eliot ("I will give you fear in a handful of dust") but the second quote takes us to the anguished Ginsberg of the "Howl" poems.

On the whole, I find Hassan the poet more readable when he is a pensive mood and writing about themes other than history and politics. This is how he begins "Written in Winter", with his "hot breath cooling" on his beloved's "soft shoulder" and the "slow beat" of her "heart" cuddling him "like a koala." But here, unfortunately, his anger with the moral squalor of politics and the nightmares of history eventually takes the poem away from the serene mood of its opening lines. Indeed, the mood changes to the extent that soon we come across the following declaration: "I love winter for it keeps the monstrous crowd/out

of sight, indoors, prevents military parades, air shows, political charades." The problem, as I see it, is that far too often Hassan's indignation takes him away from poetry, unlike, say, his favorite poet Yeats, who always manages to transform outrage or dismay into poetry with controlled metrics and profound mythmaking.

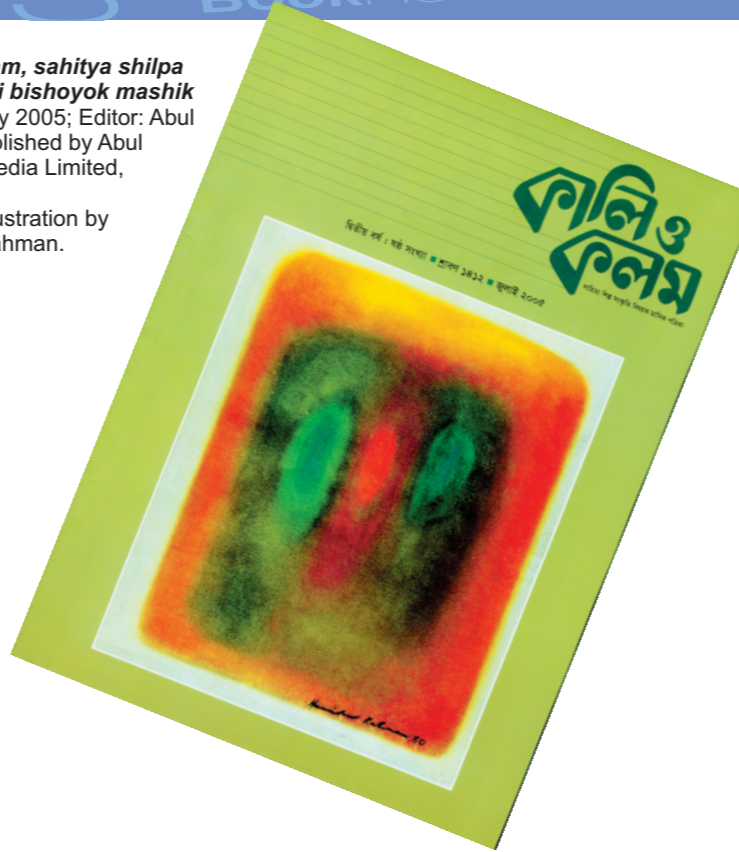
Timothy Brennan, a distinguished professor of English at Columbia, has found a unique way of praising Hassan's verse in the Introduction to *Ashes and Sparks*. He admires the poems because of their "intensity" and honest outrage. As I read the poems of the volume though, I keep thinking: when is Hassan going to learn to write a poem where from the beginning to the end he has managed to unite his thoughts and his feelings in the right proportions to create a truly effective poem about the nightmares of the history of one's nation?

Burning the Olive Branch, the last of his volumes of verse Hassan has reproduced in his *Collected Poems* is also full of bitter and/or defiant poems fighting back or crying out against political injustice, the plight of Palestine, and American aggression in Arab countries. It is in this volume that Hassan comes up with an observation that not only underscores his essential romantic affiliation but also explains his fits of exasperation: "Whoever is afraid of madness/is afraid of the truth,/for only in the frenzy of our mad moments/do we compel/our Creator/to stand face to face/and beg back our mortality." A wise poem and one that moves with a controlled gait and a poise that is profound, leaving one with the thought: why, alas, is Hassan so rarely in this mood and in such control of his emotions and his verse?

Fakrul Alam teaches English at Dhaka University.

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Cover illustration by Hamidur Rahman.

**JAYEETA BAGCHI**

In the field of folklore one would instantly recognize the name of Alan Dundes, the American folklorist. But I wonder how many of us know that folklore is a subject which needs to be studied seriously. The first national folklore workshop - 1985, organized by Bangla Academy, paved the way for folklore studies in Bangladesh. Alan Dundes not only joined the workshop as a 'foreign' faculty member, but actively inspired and helped folklore studies in Bangladesh. Shamsujaman Khan pays a tribute to the great person, who died recently, in a long article explaining why as a Bangladeshi he cannot forget Dundes. His very personal contact with Dundes allows him to write about the 'charismatic,' 'charming' human being yet he provides the readers with a very objective view about the relationship between Dundes and folklore.

This issue of *Kali O Kalam* has a lot of articles on foreign intellectuals which, I think, provides Bangladeshi readers with a great view to the fantastic world of culture lying beyond their borders. It is so important to make connections and build familiarity with authors like Thomas Mann, Ismail Kadare, Samuel Johnson, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and others that I think this issue will remain

Language celebrates 250 years of its publication (it was compiled between 1746 and 1755). On this great occasion Sagar Chowdhury, from London, provides some fascinating excerpts from the dictionary along with a short history of the book.

Minar Mansoor has taken a long interview of Shamsur Rahman, the veteran poet. The poet needs no introduction. The questions in the interview seem to be too abstract and generalized and do not in any way really throw new light upon the poetical works of Rahman.

This is also the centenary year of the *Banga Bhanga andolon*. No Bangalee can claim to have forgotten that without getting into a deep cultural identity crisis. In spite of its success in 1905 the movement was not a long-lasting one and the imperialist British rulers finally succeeded in dividing greater Bengal into two halves. The *Banga Bhanga* has a special meaning for Bangladeshis, as it provided them their national anthem '*Amar Sonar Bangla*'. Soumitra Sekhar writes an informative and important article about Tagore's involvement with the movement and his subsequent schism with it, something that lends an added meaning to the songs that he wrote on and during the *Banga Bhanga andolon*. Debjit Bandyopadhyay's article is again on Tagore's songs—his involvement with the Bangla stage through his songs. Mr. Bandyopadhyay, an authority on the subject of Bangla stage songs, has been writing on the subject for a long time and here his expertise is rather obvious.

In the arts section Dhali Al Mamun writes on the paintings of Nazi Laila

ANNOUNCEMENT

The Daily Star literature page, on the occasion of the paper's fifteenth anniversary (in 2006), will publish an anthology of fiction, poetry, and related articles consisting of the best of what has been published in the page plus entirely new pieces. Bangladeshi writers/authors/poets/translators plus our readers are invited to send in their contributions for consideration. Short stories/articles should be limited to 2000-2500 words, though this stricture can be relaxed in the case of outstanding efforts. Translators should send in the original Bangla if they are to be considered. Submissions should be sent electronically to starliterature@thedailystar.net or by snail mail to The Literary Editor, The Daily Star, 19 Karwan Bazar, Dhaka-1215. All submissions must be clearly marked 'For Anthology' (in case of electronic submission on the subject line). Only Bangladeshis need submit. We specially welcome submissions from outside Dhaka, as well as humorous pieces dealing with the lighter side of life. The last date of submission is October 15, 2005.

--The Literary Editor