

SHORT STORY

POETRY

The Enchanted Baroque

AINON MIZAN

AYAT stood motionless on the balcony to feel the time and space of a fresh day. The quiet dawn still held on to the remnants of night. The cool air caressed her face, the pleasure made her shiver slightly. She closed her eyes while listening to the Azan; one note but unsynchronized, the timing was a bit off for each call, yet together it formed a single whole - one message. That is what she loved about this city too, always chaotic, yet life fell in a rhythm. Today she heard another tune, Raag Bhairav. Somewhere close someone was greeting the God of Dawn on a different note! However much she tried to separate the two she could not. It was an amazing blend. She opened her eyes. The mist over the lake just hung there.

Many thoughts ran through her mind, a few esoteric, some creative. Someone once had said, 'Why not pen down the unconventional ideas; turn it into creative writing!' Me write? She mused. A fragment of memory made her smile. Her parents lovingly gave her an odd name, Ayat, meaning verse. Perhaps they believed she would develop a keen sense of observation and end up choreographing these in some form. Name makes a person, they firmly believed. The urge never left her, to write, that is. She kept journals, and somewhere among those bits of thoughts, a story happened! It literally unfolded itself.

She came inside, sat by her writing desk and thought she would give 'her story' a final read before the world around her woke up. Instead, she wandered off to the landscape of her life. Several years ago, upon acceptance of a story, her publisher Q sent her a laudatory note, 'a soul caressing music' it said. They had never met, yet there was this affinity that developed over countless conversations. Once she had sent a photograph with her writing, as an introduction to Q, and he had commented, "There is elegance, that grace and culture I always imagined defined your being. Now that I have seen your picture, I know I was right all along. For one of those rare times in literature, the personality of the writer matches the tenor of her work. Am I glad I have found the friend in you! It's a beautiful world." Ah yes, the human mind that loves to traverse the unknown horizon. She felt here was something different. The enigma!

After that introduction, a weekend went by. Silence seemed to be all, in time and space. There was this restless feeling in Ayat. The phone rang a few days later and the voice at the other end asked, "How are you?" "Well. And you?" she chimed in.

"Now that I have heard your voice, you could say I am well, I am happy. Music is in my heart and I am in dreamy meditation. Really...how are you doing, my friend?" And with it Q recited couple of verses in Urdu from much forgotten

old songs!

She was caught by surprise, "You are quite a poet! I cannot fathom that someone you have not met deserves such admiration. I know your command over English is very good. Now I notice your Urdu is exquisite."

To which he retorted, "There are poets and there are poetasters. I have reason to believe I fall in the latter category. As for languages, there is this musical tone in Urdu, and I just love it. Twilight descends, silence takes over...and I go home. Stay well, my thinker friend."

A number of conversations later when she remarked on his uncanny capacity to weave *ash'ar* into dialogues, and expressed a mild reservation about what such renderings mean; without missing a beat he had simply replied, "Ah yes, whenever I speak to you, some song always plays a welcome theme for you in my mind. No underlying meaning or hint of anything sinister! Don't get me wrong. It's just that you are a good friend and you know Urdu and

the warmth when you I see ...

I no longer see the shadow of night / As the scented wind holds me light / New life I feel carved in earthy sand / I see the amazing glow of stars in hand / While holding love in soundless memory / The places to go a moment take primacy ...

Smile that comes unprovoked I cherish / To fly on wings of ecstasy I wish / The touch, the words, the snapshots to keep / Love is but remembrances to reap / The sharing I rejoice, celebrate the ordinary / Feeling alive to capture beauty of eternity ...

I thus want love not to hold / But let it flow as prayer so bold / As to feel the intense desire of yearning / To worship the feel of divine longing / To be humbled by the dreams forgotten / Love is a story without script...

What do you think?" she inquired. She could hear the smile in his voice.

Is there such a thing as elegant writers? Ayat thought. Perhaps, as once Q, upon accepting another story, had written, "That was really



these two reasons make me go back to *shayari*. Remember the deep respect with which Isaiah Berlin looked upon Anna Akhmatova? I simply enjoy talking with you. Speaking of books, what have you been reading lately? Here I have a whole load, trying to read all of them together and not making much of a headway."

That was that. Thus feeling at ease she replied, "I am reading *Tin Drum* by Günter Grass - a rather dense book which I do not want to read nor do I want to set it aside! Today, from Kundera's repertoire, I remember, 'Do not liquidate people. Learn to listen to retrieve from the wordless infinitude the world of entities with meaning.' During one such defining moment when I listened to myself (!) the following happened:

(Unscripted Love)
The aura of rolling autumn I feel / When the soft kiss I gently steal / Unthinkingly I reach for your embrace / The quivering comfort in me I trace / My heart belongs to none but me / Yet feel

something, really elegant! See what I mean by intellectual links? Someday when I meet the Creator of the Worlds, I will thank Him for getting us in touch with each other. Cheers, my cerebral friend. You are light unto a world. I miss your laughter. It touches the sky!" She mused, "A sentence, a few words, a thought can it construct such unreal magic? Or destroy the calm?" To which he had replied, "Yes. But pray note, though, that out of that destruction of calm there often arises a desire to bond. The bonding is between two souls. The heart reaches out to another, and there, is embedded that abstract yet very real feeling one calls *passion*." After a pause he added, "I don't know if we will ever meet, but I do know that I will nurture this friendship, this interaction of thoughts."

Ayat reflected there is no unconditional acceptance of so called passion. Be a realist. Life is much too crude for the taste of such refined thoughts, and yes deeds! Her quiet mind asked,

or can it be the lifeline of living, to feel ALIVE? Instead she reflected with him; surely, the power of prescribed rules is such that it entwines innocent communication, even between faceless existence who have nothing to give or take from each other!

"True, but tell me, is there really nothing we, or individuals like us, can give or take from each other? There is always the intangibility, the sheer abstraction of happiness that defines meetings of the soul," he retorted.

Ayat relished such interactive exchange of ideas with Q. Once she had put her premise to him as such: As I write, you read, you respond. But you interpret my words on your terms! When the words get back to me from you, the ensuing thoughts carry a different message. As I read this, I construct something else. Or is it REALLY possible to create something NEW? Can that new detach thoughts from its thinker? Always the controversial illicit outsider, the outcast measured on the barometer of standards. Should it matter?

Then the discourse stopped for a long time. She smiled at the absurdity of these braided snapshots. Oh yes, there was one last contact. He had said, "Sorry I lost track of time. I have not been myself lately; or rather I should say my physical being seems not to be in sync with my mind!" Then, as usual, he went into a rhapsody of reciting lyrics which she had come to enjoy, being his signature trademark.

At that point Ayat had replied, 'Over the months, haven't you unconditionally and consistently proclaimed me as your friend? Even though I have never addressed you as such; it is not my forte. But I am an extremely good listener! If you wish, do share.'

Ah...the human mind! Unexpressed thoughts do not nettle the soul. By good reason, it is cast aside under the shadow of doubt. Thus spoken, broke the real. The conversations stopped. The lyrics stopped. The thoughts were no more a splash of color. And then there was silence.

Ayat is vehemently opposed to expressing her feelings. She likes the equilibrium of her emotions. Anything else she brutally shreds. She reasoned emotion is like God embedded in our psyche. It is our comfort element. We want and want from Him (or is it Her?), and if we get what we want we ask for more. If we don't get what we want, we say it is God's will; and then want some more! Insatiable need, these emotions. It is who she was; she felt secure in those reasonings - her impregnable defensive walls. The sun rises. The sun sets. From this bound time, let me fly away, she thought...

And then, she pushed the delete button to stop another story of hers from reaching its destination!

Ainon Mizan writes poetry and fiction. She is affiliated with Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA.

... from Syeda Zakia Ahsan

Blackbird's song

I sit on a tree twittering to my friends,
Watching the bright blue summer sky.
I dream with the bracing air, I wake
To the sound of a big lorry.
I am a blackbird.

I play, I see children in posh cars
Going to school. Why do I also see
Boys and girls running after shiny
Cars in tattered clothes?

Little children play in the streets,
In sunlight, in rain, in the storm.
'They haven't seen a school, a pencil
In their lives', my friend the robin said.

We go on singing the song of spring.
The children below the trees join us,
Whistling.

Afghan child

I was born in the desert
My friends are the sand, the winds
And cacti
I make houses from sand
The winds topple them

I pick flowers from cacti
I make my little garden beside the
Sand castles
The thorns prick me badly
My hands bleed

I have seen flying objects in the Sky
I have heard cracker blasts
I have not seen them
But they broke down homes
And killed people
I had thought crackers were
Shining stars
I saw my little brother die
In front of me

On the sands

On Christmas Day my mother cried.
I lost my brother in November.
I will have no Eid, Salma said.
She will be alone this time.
She lost all her family in the war.

Salma and I sat in a desert corner
Next to a tethered camel and
Reminiscence on our last Christmas And Eid.

There will be no Father Christmas
And no Eid day;
No Christmas pie and no biryani.
We looked out at the desert.

I began playing with my doll
And Salma built sand castles
That kept breaking down,
Like life's fountainhead crushed.

I hate war.
I want my brother back...
And Salma her parents.

Syeda Zakia Ahsan teaches in London and is involved in charity work for Commonwealth countries.

NON-FICTION

An Unforgettable Boat Ride

MUSHFIQUR RAHMAN

1955 was a memorable year. It was the year of the Great Flood. Our home was one of the few dwellings in the entire village which did not go under water. Our 'bangla-bari' --- an outer house detached from the main complex and used for a variety of purposes, including accommodation of a live-in school teacher --- was brimming with people who were given refuge. The temporary residents were villagers whose association with our family was forged over several generations. The communal camaraderie helped to alleviate their suffering. They waited patiently for nature to run its course; their homes lay submerged under water, with perhaps just the rooftops sticking out their heads in a show of determined defiance. There was very little to do. There was no school and our live-in tutor had returned

and steered with a long bamboo pole by none other than Makub Ali Bhai himself there wasn't anything he could not do. My father had some farm land in an adjoining village several miles away. He was concerned about the share-croppers families who tilled those fields. Usually, we saw them only during harvesting time when they brought their produce. My father agreed to let me accompany him on what I considered to be a joy ride. Our journey began at the nearest flood water point where Makub Ali Bhai docked the boat about 100 meters from our home. I don't recall any relief supplies or rations for the distressed families whom we were going to visit. It was perhaps meant to be a morale booster for the marooned farmers. One of the most fascinating sights for me was that of a raft made of banana plants tied together by vines which hang off tall trees as symbiotic plants. I saw a few young boys, not much older than me,

he smugly declares that the boatman's life is almost meaningless; then the skies turn dark and ominous; a nor'wester storm looms on the horizon; the boatman asks the sleek city dweller whether he knows how to swim and when he replies in the negative the boatman has sweet revenge by declaring that, under the circumstances, his own life might be devoid of some meaning but the life of his patron is totally meaningless. The image of watching these boys piloting their raft in an inland sea with reckless abandon while I sat crouched up in the middle of a boat will forever be a personalized sequel to this short story. So often are we blinded by our hubris. We are unaware of the impending storm which can easily shatter the shimmering glass house we live in.

Our boat plied through endless water, an enormous front which stretched out in all directions. Little clusters of inundated huts were like tiny islands in this vast sea. Our boat stopped by some of these dwellings and Makub Ali Bhai's voice boomed, breaking the deadly silence of the gloom all around, and made our presence known to the huddled humanity inside. After some shouting and hollering, a man's face would peep out of the darkness. He would poke his head out of the makeshift machang (raised bamboo platform) which he had erected as close to the ceiling as possible. All available rations were hoisted up to keep his family alive while they played a waiting game with nature's fury. There would be a brief exchange of words between my father and the man. At best those would be words of encouragement assuring him that the worst of the floods was over and that the water would soon be receding. He must hang on as it was now going to get better! We docked in and out of these submerged homes for a few hours. More greetings and more words of hope. There was nothing more we could do or offer. Trapped in their sub-human machangs, only their superhuman resilience would have allowed them to extract any hope out of our visit.

Makub Ali Bhai navigated the boat by instinct, with clumps of waterlogged cottages acting like markers. Finally, he looked at the sky and declared that it was time to turn the boat around. He didn't quite seek permission from my father for he was the captain of this little ship. We started this trip empty handed and we returned empty handed. But it was an unforgettable boat ride which imprinted in my mind some intense images of human ordeal and survival. Ours was no Noah's ark. I wish it was.

Mushfiqur Rahman grew up in rural Ghorashal where he spent his early childhood. He now lives in Melbourne, Australia.



to his own family. All activities appeared to have come to a dead-stop as nature unleashed its fury inflicting its worst assault on those who could defend the least. There was an inherent unfairness in nature's wrath, its dark mood revealing its viciousness at its worst - almost cowardly in spirit by attacking those who are most vulnerable. Being just a little kid, I was of course oblivious to this dimension of the tragedy. The buzz of so many people crammed into our 'bangla-bari' gave an appearance of a festive atmosphere. If there is any positive I can take out of this great deluge, it is my memory of an unforgettable boat ride with my father. He commissioned the ever resourceful Makub Ali Bhai, my father's trusted jack of all trades, to undertake the necessary preparations. The purpose of the mission was for my father to go on a fact-finding tour. Makub Ali Bhai hired a boat an uncovered dinghy which was propelled

navigating such a raft. They had evidently decided to get on top of their tormentor, i.e. the flood, and ride the crest of its rage and have some fun. They were carrying small fishing rods and evidently planned to take home some food too, making nature pay for its excesses. I felt a little foolish at my own incapacity and vulnerability. Dependable and deft Makub Ali Bhai might be, but I was nevertheless a captive in his hands! On the other hand, these boys had tamed nature, if not into full submission, but at least into a participatory venture like a mahout mounting an elephant. A few years later, the image of the raft-riding youngsters helped me to fully appreciate the essence of a well-known short story: the story line has a 'smart' young man from the city going on a boat ride; he quizzes the poor boatman's knowledge about 'important things' in life and harangues him about his ignorance;

..... Reality

REHNUMA SIDDIQUE

I stared at the sunset scene through my water-logged eyes. The breeze was calm and soothing. It brushed my cheeks, diverting the path of my salty tears. Yet the dynamic platform did not make much of a difference to me. I knew for a fact that the mistake I had committed was unforgivable.

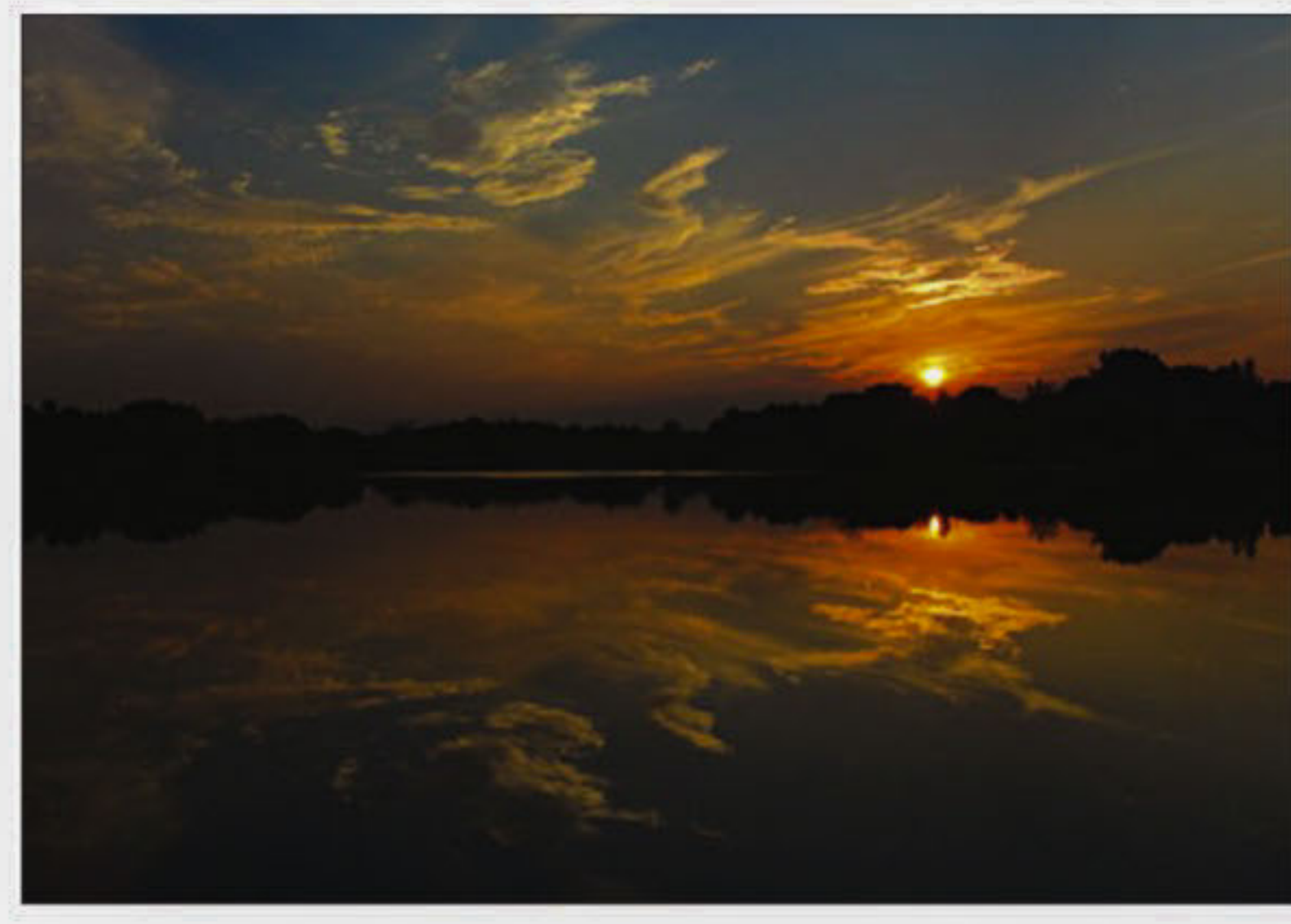
Every moment seemed to be a severe punishment to me. The guilt was penetrating me so much that nothing seemed to pacify me. I kept on making the silliest mistakes like breaking the vase in the cupboard, putting an egg in the pan to boil without water. I am the only one to be blamed. I still remember the last words Mother spoke to me before I was taking the "big step". Her voice was strict, yet a plea was there in her words: "You are wrong here at this point. I wouldn't stop you neither support you. All I can say is the path you are taking now is more like the petals of a torn flower. The path wears away soon, and so I know you will come back. But be careful that you are not too late to take a turn back." At the doorsteps of my house, the words set a gentle breeze in motion that went past my ears. All I wanted was to leave my house.

And so my impulsiveness took over my senses, compelling me to break all ties with my family and walk out on them. I knew that the formulation of a story would take place in the society we lived in. But I also knew that my parents would get used to the critical air of ruthless society.

I loved them. But maybe it was the strong force of my adolescence that pulled me towards doing the thing for which I had abandoned my family. I married. Not that I married at such a young age but that I had bonded myself and my life to a person whom I knew for a month.

But none of these played in my mind when I left the house. The consequences were bound to take place in a course of time. The first thing that I got to know about Farhaz was his involvement in drug peddling. That did shock me but that was just the start. The second thing I got to know was about his being strongly addicted to the obvious source of death. But at that time everything seemed perfect to me. His notoriety did not help me change my decision of dedicating the entire me, made by God for me, to him. Maybe it was a product of my strong stubbornness and ego.

So we decided to live at his friend's



farmhouse. Sahil's farmhouse was more like a heaven to me. It was more like a romantic movie set. A beautiful antiquated house which had liveliness seeping all through every corner, a pond with ducklings all over celebrating their moments of joy.

Although everything seemed like a precious gift at first, the bitterness of reality had to come out. Cruel fate revealed itself once again. I had never imagined, even in my worst nightmare, the harbinger of the incident that took place that night.

It all started as I was washing the utensils after one of my friends had left the house following dinner with us. I hummed a sweet tune, my favourite song, when I heard a hideous noise. I could tell that a ceramic item had been broken. As I stepped on the doorstep of the room which we used as our bedroom, my heart skipped a beat. I could hardly believe my sight. The plywood floor seemed designed beautifully with all the showpieces apart. The background was hideously disturbing with my husband desperately searching something.

At the back of my mind, I knew the reasons behind Farhaz's desperation. Each night I planned to do it, but nothing seemed to give me enough courage. But one night I decided. Maybe the decision was needed for my attempt to save Farhaz but I hardly knew that I would put my life at stake. Before I could open my mouth, my fear proved true. His direct interrogation scared me. I nervously spoke out that I didn't have a hand in removing his yaba pills.

I could tell, seeing his dark red eyes,

that my words didn't convince him. But as soon as I started trying to caress him like a child, the beastly thing took place. The thing that I couldn't even dare to imagine took place. Within a fragment of a second he threw me to the door. Maybe I was numb at first due to the sudden shock but then my eyes tried to find the source of my pain, before I found my forehead covered with a red dense fluid. Blood was dripping helplessly.

There he was again, this time strangling the life out of me. His blood-drenched lips formed words that spoke out his demand for the deadly pills. My head wasn't working anymore. All I could notice was the madness taking over his humanity. I screamed my heart out.

The next thing that I remember is that I ran and ran. The concrete highway turned into a desert. Everything seemed endless. I became tired and exhausted. All I needed was sleep or maybe an analgesic. I opened my swollen eyes with much trouble to find myself in a room filled with the aroma of medicine and treatment. I was in a hospital, I could tell from the look of the mundane stands in front of me. I closed my eyes, giving my mind over to rewind the repugnant moment I had just passed. But no, maybe it was too much of a shock for me.

That very moment I realized that there is always a way out if there is an entrance. My mother's last word drummed in my ears and so I knew my way now. My conscience spoke out at last, ordering me to ask for forgiveness from the people I had hurt most, the reason for my being.

Rehnuma Siddique is a young student and writes fiction.