POETRY

## A Beginning... A Discrete Journey

ittds@gmail.com

LITERARY EDITOR'S NOTE:

In Bangladesh we get to welcome in a new year twice. Once on 31st December. And a second time on 14th April. How blessed we feel to start afresh at the stroke of midnight; or to break open the bind of a new Hal-Khata and poise our pens atop a blank page. There is something wonderfully life-affirming about the beginning of something new. A beginning is a discrete journey of sorts, ours to interpret as we wish. An ending denotes a reactive beginning thereafter. Stuck at crossroads denotes the proactive beginning. Whatever the particular interpretation, the concept remains the same. Hope. Faith. Resolution.

Writers Block is a group of writers in different stages of being published internationally. The members are: Alizeh Ahmed, Awrup Sanyal, Farah Ghuznavi, Iffat Nawaz, Lori Simpson, Masud Khan Shujon, M.K.Aaref, Munize Manzur, Saad Z Hossain, Sabrina F Ahmad, Sadaf Saaz Siddigi, Sal Imam, Samir Asran Rahman, Shazia Omar, Srabonti Narmeen Ali and Tisa Muhaddes. They meet twice a month to critique each other's work and improve on their creative writing skills.

To celebrate Pahela Baishakh 1417, Writers Block presents their individual interpretations on the topic of 'beginnings'. Solely due to space constraints, the compilation will be printed over two Saturdays.

In this first installment, an unusual Invasion leads to the End Of Grey so that The Little Bird can dance to a Dhaka Beat before flying off towards My American Dream, exploring Places and finding spaces of life In Between.

#### Invasion

SABRINA F. AHMAD

HE hordes approached, filling up the vast expanse with their steely grey formations, a formidable gathering. A hush descended, and the air had an expectant, almost electric taste to it. The lone crow spread its sooty wings in a lazy glide that belied its nervousness at the sudden calm and the dimming light.

They had been expecting this for days. There were omens and portents enough. The heat. The frayed tempers. The welling resentment, and the feeling that something just had to give. Anything. So when the day came, unheralded it may have been, unexpected it was not. Precautions were taken; windows shuttered and bolted, doors fastened. Those who didn't have an 'indoors' to call home, found shelter under borrowed roofs, away from the onslaught that was sure to comTe. All except Reaz, and now he ran, arms and legs pumping up and down like pistons, sweat rolling down his back, breath gusting forward from his mouth. Just a little further, and he'd be home,

Too late! There was a rumbling drumroll of warning, a blast of hot air like the exhalation from the maw of a great beast, and then it really began. Flashes of colour lit up the roiling darkness, followed by the boom! BOOM! of explosions that shook you to your bones. The great masses collided and clashed, bursting forth and releasing the silver pellets and arrows that pounded the ground they landed on, reducing the hard, unyielding earth into soft dampness. The rich fragrance of wet soil rose in soft clouds, a stark contrast to the violence of the surroundings. Another blast and the trees bent backwards, even as the low moaning sound echoed through the empty alleyways.

Reaz had almost made it home when he was caught. He'd felt the chase so close, it ruffled his hair. There was another flash and crack above him, and he had to leap forward to dodge the tree branch that came down, sheared by an illaimed blast. The tiny silver missiles hit his skin, pricking him in a thousand places, and his shirt went from damp to soaking in an eyeblink. Doggedly, with staggering steps, he pressed on until he reached his doorstep.

Rita had been waiting by the window, and flew to the door, ushering her wet and bedraggled brother in.

"Caught you, eh?" she enquired with a resigned smile. They turned back for a moment to stare through the open door at the thunderstorm outside. Kalboishakhi season had officially

# **End Of Grey**

SAAD Z. HOSSAIN

popped open the tab on my noodle soup. It fizzed as the sachet released its score of vitamins. Taste calibration molecules began to color the clear white algae. There was a beauty to this, jellyfish changing color at dawn. My room was cardboard cutout, same as hundreds I had slept in. A pallet, a tray, a box for personal toiletries and extra clothes, of which I had none. I had rented the room for a week, rare, because I moved around a lot. I needed a fixed address this time, however, damn the expense. A knock. I put down my bowl, unfinished. My last friend this side of the world crawled in, wearing his physician's smock. He had his briefcase, full of the drugs I had paid for.

He charged, normally: a fee well beyond me. But this was gratis. It was the last service he would render me, in the real world. On the other side, I was about to become immortal. The Guild Lords had invited me to join their rank, an honor elevating me above thousands of gamers. I was crossing over, total virtuality, to live forever in the Guild World.

It was a moment of celebration. There had once been small ceremonies, honor amongst gamers. Too many crossovers later, there were only two of us left of our original clan; the rest scattered, throughout other cities, some trapped in real life, some shifting into other games, finding other loyalties. We hugged awkwardly. He wanted to smoke a ritual cigarette. I didn't care for it, but lit one anyway, and we shared it in

He rolled up my sleeves. Tranquilizers at first, then drugs to lower the metabolism, blood pressure and body heat, then antibodies, and finally Necroxin, proven to stop muscle atrophy in space monkeys. Then, because he was my friend, he gave me a little LSD, a bon voyage.

I jacked my pod into my neck. The Total ImmersionTM software started to interact with my optical nerves. The gray room began to fade, superimposed by the giant redwoods of the Guild World. Mini novas of sunlight burst my eyes, clean light, as it had been in the beginning. I relaxed. Details got sharper. The canopy was ten stories above me, sparkling like stars, heady with the promise of dark green. Filtered air faded from my lungs, and the flavor of the new breath was sharp with the wingbeats of insects, of peat and fresh dew and woodsmoke.

Nostalgic, I focused through the trees to my room, saw the shadow of my friend packing. He set my body in a dignified pose, inserting IV packs into my arm. He would leave me there soon, and when the week was up, the landlord would call the city medical services, to cart me to an assisted life ward, one of

It was over. I walked barefoot on the loam, felt the brand new earth beneath my skin for the first time.

### The Little Bird

MUNIZE MANZUR

HERE'S a jackfruit tree growing in front of my window. I am lying in bed, looking at it. It's been trimmed recently, I note with some sadness. It's not my jackfruit tree so I have no control over it. Its roots are in the neighbouring garden but, I assume, over the years it has leaned onto this side of the wall. The body of the tree is thus floating above what is technically our air space. I haven't known this tree long but I feel a kinship with it. For, my roots were planted somewhere else but my body is floating over someone else's air

And now the tree has been trimmed, shaved off its foliage. It looks bare, old scars exposed. There are little nubs of branches showing promise of new life but who is to know if they will ever grow into full bloom? I've trimmed my hair too. Close cropped to the scalp. So no one can ever yank me up by my braid.

#### **Dhaka Beat**

SADAF SAAZ SIDDIQI The thunder clouds loom

Ominous yet welcome. Reminders of her abeyant mood.

As the oppressive midday doesn't miss a Dhaka beat

Stifled in traffic jamming

Nerves taught with overflow like inbox spam Hot wet heavy droplet galore

A shock of quenching surround sound Liberating the space With that different pace of the coming of the rains...

For when they came They took her breath away Washed away that feeling Put in its place The connection with all that Is. Here and around.

The pouring sound Made her catch her breath As she cast her eyes She soared and dived



Sticky sauna sweat from every pore

Anticipating the coming jhor....

The cozy comfort of moist warmth Hit by mock cool a/c air

Immediate relief from the cutting glare Tempering feelings of despair Savouring the seasons that we share

Reminiscent of Tagore heralding the arrival of

borsha...

Though her senses connived To take it all away. Before she was ready To savour the moment.

Showered by the sudden Childhood exhilaration reincarnated again. To the amazement Of discovering what it is all about.

The rains and storm came Bringing breath and life Lush lush kola pata green That fresh wet sheen Washing out the dusty haze



aaji jhoro jhoro mukhoro badal dine...

Soothing around her. The falling drops Coalesce to meet Waiting for the refreshing sheet

of months afore Cleansing her senses And much much more. Challenging the dense dark damp hot heat. Finally rejuvenated to seek That Dhaka beat...

Coloured my prematurely white hair. When the ammonia burnt into my skin, I felt my wounds prickling again. And with it, my fallen pride. Here, near my front hairline is where he hit me one drunken night with his car keys. That numb lump at the back of my head is when he pushed me in a cold sober rage and I went flying into the dresser table. The psychiatrist says I must learn to process these moment so I can move on.

What is my jackfruit tree processing? Is it taking in fresh air, pure sunlight to thrive anew this coming season? But what of the four SUVs lined up in the driveway spewing out gagging streams of octane at it every morning, every night? Will it survive that? And the new high-rise 'exclusive' shopping mall at the back has all but cut off the early morning light. How will it survive if it can't see the promise of dawn?

I've come to another place where I do not have to fear daily taunts, nor fend off nightly blows. In order to make it a home though, I must relearn. How to speak so I can be heard. How to put my foot down and not lose ground. I have to unlearn too. How not to cower; but to uncurl. Not to tip-toe around his needs, but stride towards mine.

So much to do. Why then am I looking at this jackfruit tree weeping furious tears? Because...because there is a little sparrow hopping from branch to branch, ever so delicately. Pecking here. Fluffing its feathers there. Searching the optimal place to make a nest. Sitting up, I see that the giant tree must thrive not so much for itself but more for this little bird's sake.

The baby starts kicking in my stomach in response to my movement. Shifting ever so slightly, I try to make him or her more comfortable in my womb. Hush now baby. Settle down. You can't start on your own journey just yet. Let your mother find her own bearings first.

### My American Dream

MASUD KHAN SHUJON

I believe in second chances. I believe in this absolutely, for my life is a testament to the universe's ability to press the refresh button, to at least give back some of the things that are taken in its purging tsunamis, where the storm washes away the clutter and sometimes leaves clarity in its wake.

When I came to America as a student on a fee waiver scholarship at the University of Wisconsin, La Crosse, I only wanted to get my degree and go back home. After my second year, I took some time off to work illegally as I ran out of money. I came to Milwaukee, and soon a semester turned into two, a year turned into five, as I became a well-paid supervisor at the Miller Brewery. My employer, my co-workers, my friends treated me as an American, and I felt like one. Not having papers was just a technicality. I was living my own American dream, a blue-collar worker's paradise with no stress, fast cars, big TV, weekend getaways and nightly barbeques. No stress, until that knock on my door six months after 9/11.

"Mr. Fuad Hassan, this is Homeland Security. Let us in, or we will break down your door." My American dream ended with those words, to be reborn again in a Jewish butcher shop.

Blood red. Meat coming out of the meat grinder; that's the only image that now comes to my mind when I think of my first day at the shop, the Weinstein Butcher and Deli. My first day at the shop, I was only allowed to man the meat grinder. I stood behind the meat grinder, fed the chunks of meat into the machine, and saw the red remains come out.

"Good work, Fuad," Mr. Weinstein smiled at me, his eyes barely visible behind his long beard and thick glasses. After three years of being locked up in the downtown detention center with gangbangers and pimps who spoke in monosyllables; whose curses and grunts were accentuated with a kick or a punch, the pleasant voice and demeanor of my boss was tonic for my caged soul, a springboard from which my prison battered senses could recover and find the glimmer of the optimism I felt before I was incarcerated. I smiled back with enthusiasm. The blood in my hands was not refuse; on that first day out of the center and at work, at the only place that would hire me after I won my appeal to the Immigration Tribunal, the blood felt like the birth remains of newborn possibilities and opportunities, my new American dream.

### **Places**

IFFAT NAWAZ

HE thing about places is that they make you believe in lies. Out of context truths can be lies. That's why I never trusted how a place made me feel. That might work to my disadvantage you might say. And to clear that up I should say I am not talking about planned vacations or weekend trips to parents, I am talking about those planned non-vacations, the migrations and di-migrations, the ones you impose on yourself to encourage progression of some kind, wealth, health, spirituality...all bull.

So that's why I don't believe my daughter when she says she is happy. Happy! Huh! She really thinks she can be happy in that godforsaken land of ours by wrapping a cotton shari and hanging out with the jhola parties in art college, sipping on tea made with sewage water! She says finally she feels like she belongs. Of course she feels like she belongs with all that just-landed-bohemian-beauty attention she is getting.

The truth is she has always been lost. She would read those nonsense books by second generation Bengali-Americans about displacement issues, rants and retardation. These kids don't know what they are writing about, if she asked me once I could tell her that displacement is something we are born with as soon as we exit our mothers' wombs, we are displaced from our roots. So deal with it! Don't go trying to recognize, realize and reflect.

She thinks I am delusional. She thinks I am more lost than her. She told me after my third marriage that I look for stability through intense emotions to keep me occupied and that I, her mother, was the root of her issues. Apparently I could never make her feel like there was ground beneath her feet. So what about the ivy league education, trips to Europe and years of shopping sprees damaging my credit cards? I asked her would she feel more grounded if we lived out of a cardboard-box and ate at soup kitchens? She said yes, apparently that way at least we would have each other.

So I am getting on the plane today. When I land I will go straight to Charukola, I met her father there...that was 30 years ago. I will find her and tell her what she is feeling is a lie. What she felt when she was with me living in the USA was a lie. I will tell her it's all a lie, all the places we have been to together and separately and what they made us feel... lies... I will tell her for the first time to come back to me, where she belongs, where she was before she felt displaced, my womb, to her mother...where it all began before the end started.

### In Between

AWRUP SANYAL

HE first thing I remember is the taste of leather and dirt. Something kept banging against my chin. When I opened my eyes I saw a big-ass army issue leather boot swinging in. Thwack! I winced more out of habit because I felt no pain.

I turned over onto my back and avoided the next swing. It missed my nose by some nano centimeters. I was looking up the leg, of a large sized man, into a face. He looked mean.

"Where am I?" I asked still spitting the dust out. "You are in between. And I am the angel who has

been tasked to set you up for the journey." He said. "In between?"

"Life and death, you moron." He spat. "But, aren't angels supposed to be beautiful apsaras with wings?"

"That's what they teach you down there. Up here things are different. We had to fight for gender equality and all that. Now it's all even. Come on, we are late!"

Since I was already dead I felt braver. "You have to tell me where we are going or I am not budging!"

"You are not getting it, are you? FYI, we are not going anywhere. You are, dumb ass."

### **BARGAIN BIN BOOKS:**

### Thrill of the Find

RAANA HAIDER

"What a difference there is between one who compiles a book from hearsay in the comfort of his home and one who has gone through the tribulation of travel."

Al-Maqdisi, The Best of Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions, 10th century

"To read through a geography is dull business, but to travel through your geography is enlightening indeed." Price Collier, The West in the East, 1911

OW does one identify an incorrigible second-hand book browser? The tilt of the head is the first ■ giveaway. The hunter will be scanning titles off the spine of books as well as surveying a beckoning horizon of shelves and tables of potential literary gems. These dual features stamp the inveterate bibliophile. Here is a bookworm who loves to travel and an antiquarian traveler particularly interested in remnants of the past - who loves to read. In my persistent endeavor to locate literary loot, I have scanned bookshops across continents. In pursuit of the finer things - in my quest for second-hand books, intangible factors come to play such as emotion, passion, taste and even psychology. In the process, this traveling wordsmith has come across some temples to literature. These are some of my precious finds made over the past decade.

A meaningful crossover took place in the summer of 2004 in Toronto. With my heart set on a smart jacket, I then fell upon A Middle East Mosaic: Fragments of Life Letters and History (2000) by Bernard Lewis in a second-hand bookstore on Yonge Street, the longest street in all of Canada. Armed with CA\$30 in cash and no credit card backup, I was faced with a tough dilemma wearable jacket or a hard cover book with a beckoning jacket cover. Mulling over the crucial choice there was no scope for a comeback, since departure from Toronto was scheduled for early next morning.

One of life's turning points emerged as I opted for the book over the wearing apparel. Since I was working on a literary travelogue on the Middle East, the book blurb promise of 'a treasury of stories drawn not only from letters, diaries and histories, but also from unpublished archives and previously untranslated accounts' proved to be too much of a temptation to ignore. The blurb's elaboration: 'in a spirited reappraisal of Western views of the East and Eastern views of the West, Bernard Lewis gives us an overview of two thousand years of commerce, diplomacy, war and exploration' ultimately sealed the selection. To boot, the 470 page book authored by Bernard Lewis an authoritative historian and Professor Emeritus of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University was priced at CA\$29.95 reduced from a hefty CA\$53.50. Here I chose food for the mind over accessorizing the body. And I have lived not to regret this defining choice.

Such an uplifting choice also befell me the following summer once again in Toronto when I came across Zen and the Art of Travel by Eric Chaline (2000). This literary find was ironically sourced at a bookshop located in Eaton Square, the city's glitzy shopping mall that embodies capital consumer craving. Originally priced at CA\$29.95, the knock down offer was for CA\$9.99. Here is a low cost find that raises travel to a higher spiritual journey - that of selfdiscovery following paths of contemplation and inspiration. Beautifully put together, with pearls of wisdom ('The difference between landscape and landscape is small, but there is a great difference between the beholders' Ralph Waldo Emerson) and ('We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want' Tao te Ching) that grace great graphics and postcard photographs here is material that is soul for the heart and the head.

A tongue-in-cheek take on the classic age of nineteenth century travel writing is The Lost Art of Travel: A Handbook for the Modern Adventurer by Vic Darkwood (2006). A bargain book warehouse located between St. Lawrence Market (home to delectable bread and cheese and delicious delicatessens) and Union Station (the city's train central hub) in Toronto yielded this hilarious account of travel in yonder years by an indefatigable British traveler. Here I became privy to nuggets of information: the famous annual Tour de France cycling event was originally conceived in 1903 as a publicity stunt to sell copies of L'Auto newspaper and that the rickshaw first appeared in the late 1860s in Yokohama, Japan as jin-riki-shaw (a man-powered vehicle). With umpteen notes of advice sourced from old books for survival of the fittest only - one of the gems is: 'Never rub your eyes except with your elbows'.

(TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

In no time we came upon this building that looked so ordinary from the outside that you wouldn't even give it a second glance. Decrepit, with vegetation springing out of its well defined cracks; parts threatening to fall apart. "Where the hell is this?" I asked.

"This is the House of Justice. A halfway house for jokers like you. Your future gets decided here, you dweeb." The angel explained. He had quite a colourful vocabulary for an angel.

I saw a long spotless white corridor with no end in sight. It felt like someone had taken extreme measures to hide this building from view.

"Why does it look so run down from outside?" I asked. "Stop being naïve. We have to be covert or we will have twits like you queuing up for favours. In no time it will become a corrupt system like the shitty ones you have down there." Ahead I spotted RESTROOM. Immediately I needed to go. My stomach was rumbling and my bladder was bursting. The hair at the nape of my neck was wet and rivulets of sweat ran down my back. It was quite cold in here. I pushed the door of the restroom to go inside. Mr. Angel stood outside and lit up a cigarette. I got out of the toilet leaving it as clean as I found it.

Mr. Angel dropped the cigarette on the floor and squished it under his boots. When he lifted the boot the cigarette was gone. He motioned me to walk on. My footsteps echoed off in a crisp sibilant shuffle. We came to a door. VERDICT ROOM, it read. Outside the door Mr. Angel stopped. "Good luck! I like you, you know. Listen. Tell them that it is

your wish to serve the masters and that you want nothing for yourself. If you are lucky you might get to stay here and become an angel. I can do with a new partner. The old one goofed up."

As he walked away I called after him, "Mr. Angel!"

He turned around.

"Can I bum a cigarette?" He fished one out of thin air and gave it to me. Then whipped

a lighter in the same fashion and lit it. "Thank you" I said.

He smiled and vanished. "Next!" A voice from the behind the door.

I took a deep drag on the ciggy, patted my hair in place, and brushed the dust off my trousers. "Coming!"