

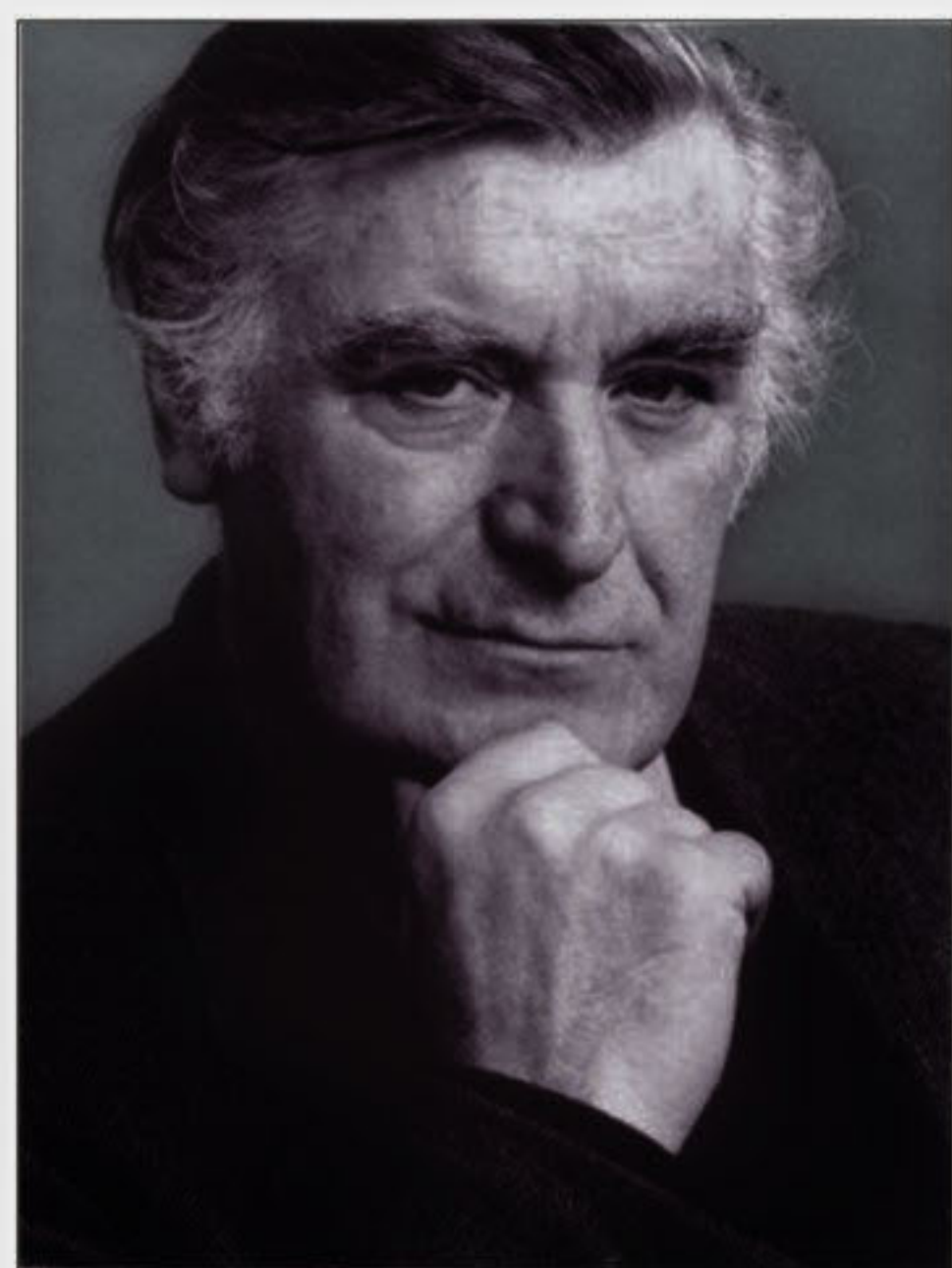
FLASHBACK

## Ted Hughes at our home

NAZMA YEASMEEN HAQUE

I consider myself extremely lucky having had the privilege of welcoming Ted Hughes, the late poet laureate of Britain, as a guest at our home in Uttara. It was the year 1989 and the season was mild winter. By sheer coincidence, I was asked by the poet's liaison officer to arrange a cultural evening-cum-dinner in Bengali style in the informal and relaxed atmosphere of a home, an experience that the poet himself wished for when he was on the last leg of his tour of Bangladesh. Although initially nervous, I was beside myself with joy at the thought of the plan taking a concrete shape at our home. Then again, I panicked momentarily, telling the surprised liaison officer that I didn't have furniture good enough to welcome the poet laureate with. The officer simply smiled and waved my worries aside. That same evening Ted Hughes flew back to Dhaka after a few days' stay at the Sundarbans, having had first hand experience of observing wildlife in their natural habitat, which was one of his passions throughout his life.

As he entered our home, we saw quite a hefty man with broad shoulders and ruddy cheeks walking in a kind of regal gait, looking rather tired. I could instantly guess why he wanted to have a quiet evening listening to songs and music in a family atmosphere. We had been briefed by his liaison officer. He had told us that we could feel very free in talking with him on various subjects, except mentioning anything about Sylvia Plath, whose tragic end we remembered. We took the advice well. Ted Hughes asked



that we delay dinner, although it was getting pretty late, because according to him in the Sundarbans he and his team had been fed like kings. He described it as a very big feast every time. He left to us the choice of presenting songs and instrumental music in any order we liked. So at first a Tagore song was presented by Sajed Akbar. Then there were a few modern songs and

Nazrul's songs sung by my sisters Sabina Yasmin, Farida Yasmin and Nilufar Yasmin. At this stage, there was a request from Ted Hughes for a particular Nazrul Geet, a request that he expressed by narrating the theme, adding that the name of the bird appeared in the refrain. The explanation was guessed correctly by Farida Yasmin, who rendered the song *chokh gaelo chokh gaelo kaeno dakishre/chokh gaelo pakhire/chokh gaelo pakhi* twice. The poet enjoyed it thoroughly.

There were moments when everyone had a chance of talking to him in line with her or his interest. Caroline Wright, an American poet of note in recent years, accompanied Ted Hughes. She had already spent about four years in Calcutta and Dhaka busy in the job of translating poems by women poets only, those that were almost ready to be published at the time. We also talked about the poet's visits to some cluster villages along with President Ershad, in one of which a villager had presented him with a bottle-gourd that he held in his hand as he sat on the raised platform made for his reception.

The poet laureate showed intense interest while listening to Shahadat Hossain Khan's *sarod* recital in a dimly illuminated drawing room and asked for the name of the *raga* which revealed that he was pretty conversant with the music. Later on he recollected Shahadat Hossain Khan's recital in London, adding that he had attended that function. It was very much evident that the poet was really fond of our music in the broad sense. We noticed that for every performance he kept his eyes closed as if engrossed to get the essence of it, the music belonging as it did to the

culture of a different region.

With a smiling face Hughes kept on looking only when my ten-year old nephew danced to the rhythm of a folk song in a fast beat. Everybody seemed to have access to him. That included my youngest son, who was supposed to receive him with a bouquet. Although he had been missing, right at that moment he appeared as if from nowhere, sat next to the poet and started talking about his O-level examination and higher education to which Hughes lent an equally sympathetic ear. His interest in people, their predilections turned him into a very approachable personality. He felt easy and so did we all. It never appeared to us that a distinguished poet of his stature was sitting amongst us. It was rather a very natural and soft-spoken person there, one it seemed we had met before. Finally came my turn to serve dinner. As I served the appetizer, which was the pineapple juice, I hesitated, saying that it was rather sour. He reassured me, "It is supposed to be sour." He appreciated all the preparations made about the food, in particular *handi kabab* in which he showed great interest after I had described it as beef paste. When everything was said and done, it was past 11 pm and everyone needed to say goodbye.

The poet's visit was an extraordinary experience and a very precious gift to all of us from him. Now that he is no more, we cherish that memorable evening all the more dearly.

Dr. Nazma Yeasmeen Haque writes reviews and essays, loves music and is Principal, Radiant International School.

POETRY

### Rain, you whisper . . .

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Rain, you say in that terse note, as The skies explode in cheerful fury. Brishti . . . that is the rainmaker in You marvelling at the searing, soaring Light piercing the clouds pregnant With possibilities.

And then silence takes over. Does it, Though? For across the wooded valleys Shrouded in the silvery veil come the Songs that heave and rise in your soul. In the springtime glow of your cheeks, Melody finds its way to the autumnal Light of your eyes.

Rain, you say again, stepping out into It to weave your way into dance. Grace And poise become you in full measure As your song rises through the mist, rushing Past the stars in its odyssey to the timeless. You are a goddess in pursuit of new creation. A cave dweller loves you on earth.

For the passion of woman rises to the Fullness of force in you, as the earth's core Heats up in the frenzy of new growth. Rain Cascades down your cheeks, kisses that gem Of a dimple on the way and makes of your Neck a sylvan stream.

Rain, you whisper in the sweetness of your Dreams. A distant window creaks open. A song in the wind speaks of cherry blossoms, of the poetry in your eyes.

### Love for...

RIM SABRINA

You are the summer wine I never dare to drink but secretly desire You are the rainbow colored butterfly flying in the wide open You are the Goosebumps I get watching "Roman Holiday"

You are so beautiful, just like a bright sparkling shooting star You are the eye candy I would love to take to a glam party You are the one who makes me feel I can reach the sky

My love, it's my time to give in Sugar, it's time I take you out of that lonesome closet Honey, it's my time to give you a soft tender kiss

Baby, please walk the same walk with me Down the city street, over cloud number nine And across my enchanted heart

Yes dear, my new Jimmie Choo high heel, I love you so much.

Rim Sabrina writes poetry, fiction and articles.

NON-FICTION

## A room with a view

TANVEERUL HAQUE

Ever the intrepid adventurer, I never pass up a chance to go exploring whenever the opportunity arrives. So when my wife Eva's friend the inimitable Poly invited us to accompany her to her village home on the weekend I grabbed the opportunity with both hands. Alas! My niece and her mother were flying in from Washington DC that very morning at 0450 and my sister and I were to receive them. Due to these logistical constraints, Eva opted out of the trip and I was in a bit of a quandary myself, what with the World Cup matches going into the wee hours of the night. Ultimately, I decided I would make it. So I packed my overnighter and went off to bed by midnight.

My driver's call on the cell phone woke me up just as the alarm went off at 0400. By 0515 my driver, my sister with her son Zeeshan and daughter Karishma and I were at the airport in two cars. Shaira and her mother were out of the airport at 0645. Dropping them off at my mother's, I phoned Poly only to learn that they were already on the way to Minagazi Bhuiyan Bari at Dagan Bhuiyan in Feni district in two separate cars. I had planned for this exigency and Poly guided me to the Titipara bus stop where I boarded the not too uncomfortable bus bound for Maijdee Court, with instructions to get off at the KG school at Khonarapur after Tulatali Bazar.

The 8 o'clock bus left at 8:30; and settling in, having consumed a teeny weeny cup of tea and a pack of glucose biscuits, I promptly dozed off into an intermittent sleep/dream sequence. At 1330 the helpful bus conductor woke me up and deposited me on the roadside right opposite the KG school. I phoned Poly and she sent her brother and cousin to meet me and escort me to their ancestral home. The home was actually a cluster of *pucca* houses with a large courtyard in the middle, a big pond with a cemented *ghat* and lush green rain trees their greenness accentuated by the recent drenching shower. I could visualize the heyday of this "bari" maybe half a century back, a distant memory now. We promptly departed for Poly's *khalabari* a few

kilometers away for a sumptuous luncheon to me, the word always brings to mind Somerset Maugham's eponymous short story. The cooking was done on a firewood *chula* that always enhances the taste of the food as charcoal gives a low heat and takes longer to cook, that brings out the true Bangali flavours. Post lunch, back at Poly's we had an animated discussion on the World Cup with the discussants polarizing around Brazil and Argentina. By then it was time for tea and biscuits. I partook of the tea, only skipping the cookies in anticipation of the dinner to come, the aroma of which was already swirling in the courtyard.

The much hyped/anticipated match between Brazil and Portugal turned into an insipid affair with both teams playing cautiously for a draw, although there were anxious moments for both sides. By the time the match ended I was quite hungry. What with skipping the biscuits, my stomach was growling. Mercifully, dinner was served right away. I guess the others were as hungry as me! And what a dinner! *Pulao*, plain rice, *maach bhaja*, chicken roast, beef *bhoona* and *shutki maach* no, "do maacha" that is *chhurir shutki* with regular fish *taki maach* in this case. Well, for me that took the cake. I had a difficult time restraining myself from overeating. My good friend Amin Bhai, a cricket fanatic, calls it stopping "short of length". I guess I went "overpitched" rather than "full length".

As the time to retire approached, I noticed that I had been allotted a room with a big bed all to myself. Next to the room was a small veranda protected by an iron grill. I was in a deep sleep within minutes of hitting the bed. Mercifully there weren't any mosquitoes, the night temperature was cool and I slept till first light and then some more. A light drizzle attracted me to the verandah, where the view that was not evident at night in the darkness unfolded in the faint glow of early morning and took my breath away. The shallow land adjacent to the veranda had turned into a vast lake that extended for hundreds of feet to my left and right as well as straight ahead where it met the highway. The rain was falling in a slow, steady drizzle and droplets were blowing in through the grill to land

on my face, giving a tingling sensation like a feather tickling your face. I pulled up a chair to sit closer to the grill to observe the view in better detail. The sky darkened and the rain upped its tempo, falling in torrents, then in slanted sheets as if italicized - as the northwesterly wind picked up. The raindrops grew fatter, creating larger craters as they hit the water's surface. I was thrilled by the play of the wind and the rain. The sound picking up to a crescendo and holding there for long minutes and then suddenly toning down to a stage whisper and then building up and falling down again and again ah, what a symphony! Nature playing an orchestra! Then the rain almost stopped and then held to a light drizzle. It was then, as if on cue, that the fauna took over the stage. A long, graceful undulating queue of ducks swam into the middle of the pool merrily quacking and rustling their feathers in joyous revelry. Oh yes! And you could notice

amorous advances by the iridescent plumed male duck to his entourage of drab coloured females. In the distance a heron, till now invisible, took to languorous flight, swooping low over the water in delicate slow motion, trailing his long knotted legs. Then I noticed the egrets wading in the pool - cautiously, purposefully stirring up the small fish to be gobbled up for breakfast.

In the distance the school building, a long low row of rooms with a tin roof, started to come to life too. Tiny students started trooping in and then their teachers, mostly ladies, came too. The school-bell went off the gong resonating and echoing over the rice paddies. The students lined up inside the veranda to sing the national anthem which wafted in gently with the rain drenched breeze. *My Golden Bengal, I love you* ..... The charming hostess brought in a steaming cup of tea and toast biscuits, leaving them quietly on the side table and departed with a sidelong look. Was that a hint of a smile on her face? Must have been amused to see a city bloke observing such a mundane scene with so much wonderment, which to her was a daily ritual in the monsoon mornings! I was woken from my reverie as if rudely interrupted in a dream that I wanted to run on. My dalliance with the charms of the rustic scenery ended, to remain tucked away in a remote corner of my subconscious "to flash upon that inward eye which is the bliss of memory".

"Breakfast is served," the maid chimed to me as all the guests of the house assembled around the dining table. My morning show was over. It behooves mentioning that my impromptu writing was inspired by Badrunessa, a name I give to the eternal *mehboobas* that reside in a man's heart, which takes no form or shape and eludes the grasp --- but provides agony and ecstasy in equal measure.

Tanveerul Haque likes to think of himself as an incurable romantic, but is actually a businessman who loves travelling, reading, movies, music. He is a member of The Reading Circle and can be reached at tanveerh@yahoocouk.



SHORT STORY

## Poppy . . . in her minimalist existence

MAHJABEEN KHAN

The first time I saw her she stood on one side of the dining room, ramrod straight, like a dancer, her eyes downcast, staring at the floor. She twirled the tassel of her *doppata* with her fingers in a continuous nervous motion. Her flawless skin was a couple of shades darker than *cafe au lait*, setting off her exquisitely chiseled features like that of a bronze statuette. Her eyes, when she did look up occasionally, were as dark as the night; but a brilliant twinkle lit them up every time she flashed her dazzling smile. Her long, jet-black hair was combed back and neatly tied in a thick braid. She was tall, much taller than an average local girl, and slender. She spoke in a soft intimidated voice, almost inaudible.

I was looking for a part-time help for my house and a neighbour was kind enough to have found the girl for me, although she warned me that the applicant was neither intelligent nor experienced, even a bit slow in the head; but that she was eager to learn. My daughter was coming for her usual summer break and I was more than desperate to get someone before she arrived.

One Friday morning her foster mother brought her to my house. The girl had lost her mother when she was a few months old. They called her Poppy. When I asked her if she knew the meaning of her name, she nodded and said, 'Phool' (flower) with a sheepish smile. As the interview progressed my hopes started to rise. Contrary to what I had been told, Poppy was smart enough to have worked in a garment factory, operating a heavy machine, before which she was a live-in help, according to her, in the house of 'the richest man in Bangladesh!'

There was something very childlike, very naive about her disposition. I instinctively liked her. Most probably still in her teens, her claim being

23 or 24, she was married without any children as yet, and lived with her husband and her widowed mother-in-law. She seemed content and happy with her life and often talked with my daughter about her home and family, especially her husband, the whole of that summer. Their bonding was instantaneous.

While Poppy would sweep the floor or dust the furniture, my daughter would be reclining in front of the TV in the family room, invariably striking up a chat-line. Topics would vary but would unmistakably revolve around marriage, husbands, mothers-in-law and, of course, babies. Not surprising, as both of them were recently married. My entry into the room was almost always treated as an intrusion; the two-way conversation, interjected with giggles, would abruptly become a soliloquy. I would only hear one-sided enquiries from my daughter and barely whispered answers from the other side. The near silent atmosphere would compel me to look for other venues.

With just me in the room, Poppy would metamorphose into an entirely different identity. It bothered, even irked me to some extent, that I made her feel so ill at ease. No matter how much I coaxed or pleaded with her, she would inadvertently withdraw herself into her shell but would continue with her work in total silence. Her answers were always in monosyllables, like 'ji' (yes), 'ji na' (no) or 'ji accha' (alright). Sometimes I pushed my luck a little further and threatened her in jest, 'Poppy, if you don't look up and talk to me you may not get to eat lunch today'. She would reward me with a quick look straight into my eyes accompanied by a bright smile, as though she found this hollow warning quite amusing. She ate like a bird and as far as she was concerned eating was a chore.

She was fast picking up on the household work

and in no time I was forced to be more efficient in stocking up on Windex, Brasso, wood polish, etc, etc. I failed to understand way she came with such a shaky resume. She had a few harmless quirks, if you think they are quirks, but nothing that should prevent her from working for a living. Yes, she preferred to look down when talking (that too with certain individuals). So? She liked to arrange the floor cushions wrong side up. To her, the dull natural dyed batik was unattractive vis-a-vis the relatively bright flat coloured fabric on the underside of the cushions! The silver plates certainly looked better face down. And the napkins were always ironed and folded wrong side out. After trying to teach her the 'right' ways with little success I decided to relax and give up. These 'mistakes' meant nothing to her in her minimalist existence. It became a habit with me to 'fix' everything when I got back from work. It took me less than sixty seconds to put things 'right'. The napkins? Who cared, as long as they were washed and clean? Poppy's house must have been having much graver agendas than my silly silver plates put upside down. I realized how happy I was to have her as a help and a companion for my daughter.

One day, sometime during autumn, an incident changed the usual atmosphere in my house. When I came home from work Poppy opened the door. I was particularly tired that day and was craving for a foot rub. She looked disheveled, loose strands of hair all over her face, her eyes red and swollen. Quite obviously she hadn't showered and barely greeted me. I could hardly shut the front door behind me when Poppy suddenly dropped at my feet and, holding them tightly, broke into uncontrollable sobbing, accompanied by a barrage of incoherent mumbling of which I could make no sense. I was so taken aback, more anxious than anything else!

Grasping her shoulders I tried hard to make her stand up, to no avail.

By then Bua, my elderly cook, had emerged from the kitchen. I looked at her quizzically and almost shouted in desperation for an explanation. She said, 'apnar akta shaban-dani bhaingale felsey' (she has broken one of your soap dishes). I think my sigh of relief could have been easily heard by all of my nineteen neighbours! At that point I had no desire to know which soap dish had met its fatal end, the one that belonged to my daughter when she was a baby or the Venetian blue glass my mother-in-law had given me many, many years ago. Or was it the damned Wedgewood I had bought in a flea market somewhere in Yorkshire when I was a young bride? I treasure soap dishes. Please don't ask me why. My initial thought was that nobody was dead (except a wretched soap dish), nobody was electrocuted, no one had taken swigs of phenyl or harpic or windex intentionally or unintentionally and thankfully the house was not on fire God forbid! Instinctively, I gave her a hug once I managed to make her get up. "Poppy, kichu hobey na. Please, ar kanbi na" (it's alright Poppy. Please don't cry). The expression on her face was a strange mixture of shock and relief.

The next day Poppy seemed much at ease with me, even talked to me without being asked to. I wanted to know why she had been so frightened and agitated the day before. She looked at me with her doleful dark eyes and told me in a quiet voice that in the house she earlier worked for, the lady of the house was an angry woman. The servants were generally seen saying sorry to her anywhere from twenty to twenty five times, even if they had not committed any offence. One day Poppy had broken a glass, unintentionally. The offence was enough for the lady to deny any food to Poppy all day.

As I lay down in bed that night I began to take

a mental inventory of the various knick-knacks I have all over the house and started to dislike them. Useless, some expensive, some not so, dust gathering, inert objects just stand there, taking up precious space and time, even demanding unconditional love and care. I realized how little they meant to me now.

She became pregnant and left me after a few months. While she was still with me, one evening she was sitting on the rug beside my rocker, watching TV with me while giving me a foot rub. Suddenly she said in all seriousness, 'Khalamma, amar zodi maiya hoi toile apnare diya dimu. Ar zodi seley hoi ami raikkha dimu.' To my stupid 'kono?' she said, 'Maiya houwa bala na; maiyader onek koshto. Amar motho zibon hoibo. Ami maiya chai na. Apni na niley Apu (my daughter) re diya dimu.'

I tried to put in a bit of my wisdom in the conversation and said, 'E rokom bolte hoi na Poppy. Meye-chhele shob shoman. Eshob bolle Allah raag korbe' She stood up, looked at me with a tint of anger in her eyes and said, 'Korugya!' She had her baby, a girl, and promptly called me to remind me of the one sided deal! Summer was here and time for my daughter to come visit me. Poppy brought her beautiful baby girl for us to see. I watched her, more radiant than ever, nurse her baby as we all sat in the family room having tea, moa and mishti. The girls were catching up on all that had happened in the past year. A photo session duly took place in the midst of much laughter, with each one of us getting to hold the baby for the shoot. It was fun afternoon.

As it was getting dark and time for Poppy to leave, her mood somewhat changed. She had a somber look in her eyes. In a quiet, defeated voice she said, 'Or baape abar biya korbo' (her father will marry again!).

Mahjabeen Khan is with Bengal Foundation.