

NON-FICTION

'I gotta feeling...'

RIM SABRINA

Okay, beautiful! Now I have to cross the road, the thing I hate to do. I don't know if they have a specific medical term for the fear of crossing roads. They should have one. If they can have a name for the fear of spider (arachnophobia), why can't mine get a name, too? Crossophobia- the fear of crossing the road! Nice! Or it can be "roadophobia", right? Anyways, the green signal is on for walking. Like a very smart raccoon, I carefully looked at my right and left and crossed the road with other people. But do raccoons follow the traffic signals? No, they just jaywalk, because they are little furry animals and not humans. Maybe I have too much coffee in my system and now high on caffeine and thinking of how the traffic signal system works in raccoon society.

All right, somehow I managed to get on the other side. Thank god! The hard part is over. Now I need to start my PhD. For that I have to find my supervisor. I looked for him everywhere in building 35 but could not find a trace of him. The lady at the reception gave me this building number and his room number. Just when I decided to get back to the reception, I heard an angelic voice saying he knows

where Dr. Yildirim is. Later I came to know that he is our lab engineer, Brend. Anyways, I finally found my supervisor; not in building 35 but in 34. With a big smile he welcomed me. Then he introduced me to his colleagues and lab members. I was trying to remember the names but it was a futile attempt. I cannot remember someone's name unless I hear it every day for the next seven days. After seven days, it gets imprinted in my head. Yeah, that's me with the brain of a parrot! I wonder how come they decided to take me as a PhD student at the world renowned Helmholtz Research Center, Munich. The center is in Neuherberg. It is right beside the Olympic Stadium. I could see the bird's nest shaped stadium from the main entrance. Quite interesting!

I was given a huge office desk with a PC. Best part was that there were sticky pads on the desk. I love sticky pads. Wasting no time, I started to write little "all in a day's work" notes. In less than three minutes my computer monitor looked like a sunflower with all the yellow sticky pads around it. Lovely!

There isn't much to do on the first day. It was around half past twelve and my colleagues picked me up and we went to the cafeteria. Here in Germany, they call it "menza". The food was good but a little expensive. But that's okay. I'm happy as

long as I don't have to bring lunch from home. We lazy people refuse to cook.

After lunch I went to the lab to see what my colleagues were up to. They were doing tracheotomy on mice. To my surprise, there was a little radio which was turned on at the top of its lungs. I recognized the song. It was "I gotta feeling" by Black Eyed Peas. Seemed liked hip hop and science can co-exist! Who said scientists are uncool? Immediately I fell in love with the lab atmosphere. It's perfect for me. I could imagine myself listening to Flo Rida while counting murine neutrophils under the microscope. Sweet!

It's almost 3pm by my watch and I'm done with signing some papers regarding my admission here as a PhD student. It was raining outside. As if only snowfall were not enough. By 5 pm, I decided to wrap up for today and go home. For me, all in all, it was a good start at the Helmholtz. Now all I want is to proudly walk out of here after three years as a cool scientist with an attitude and a great passion for science (and also for hip hop music :P).

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SHORT STORY

The Cage of Bones

SHUSHANTO MAJUMDAR

Translation: RIFAT MUNIM

The sickening light of the old lantern is disrupted by the gust of the stirring wind blown from the horizon. Then the dark lingering in the background invades. A breath of air emanating from the trees and their outer coatings has assumed the form of pent-up thoughts. The sky looks grave tonight. The moon has vanished without a trace. Latif stares over the marauding wall of darkness leaning on the damp courtyard. He cannot spot the faces squatting before him. He wonders if they are humans or just a cluster of warped shadows. How these devils have poked in at the right time as if snuffling about in the air! When he got down from the launch this morning, no one showed up. He himself had to carry the entire luggage heavy with bottles and glasses inside. How shameful, he had thought, to carry all those loads before his Dhakaite pals! Where were they hiding at that time? Having arrived *Mia Bari* he had to holler at Abdul to reassert himself. 'You faithless thugs! I had to carry all the bags. Then why do we feed so many servants?'

His friends, however, were greatly delighted with the new place. They got inside rejoicing while he gathered himself looking at Abdul's startled face. No one knew anything about his sudden visit. Then why should anyone be expected at the launch *ghat*? He ordered pigeon at once, as if to conceal his own bad-temper.

That pigeon is now being cooked. The heady scent of the oily spices is floating over the yard. Inside his friends are waiting bending over the pillows with the bottles set on the table, whereas he is listening to these greedy rustic animals who are quibbling about some silly property affairs. Impossible! he thinks. If there were a rifle to grab, he could oust them right at that moment. But that would be too much for them. Besides, the ensuing nuisance will totally ruin their festive mood. He gets hold of himself. As he calms down, the object of his wrath diverts turning round on himself. Why should he be caught up in this property affair? What does he know about land property? Is this why he lives in Dhaka? He has kept himself away from this rain-soaked, bush-filled place for near about seven years. Even the yearly visit on vacation has become irregular. On coming here, it never takes him more than two days to gasp for breath and rush back to the city. He does not feel any connection to his ancestral homestead. Nor can he mix up with anyone here. These dirty, vile-tempered beasts are ever increasing in these villages. How does one possibly live with them? Not only their skin, even their bad breath spreads germs all over the place. From their hollowed eyes they would send the piercing look, as if, to chop up a well-built man into pieces. He set foot in this place after two years. Not for his own, nor to look into some property affair. It was his friends who insisted this time that they should go for a change. And this is the place they selected for partying. But to his utter dismay, he is possessed by these devils in their first night.

His mind begins digging deeper. He could have easily stayed out of it all only if one of his two elder brothers had settled in the village. However, no sooner had their father closed his eyes and laid to rest beside their mother, than they wasted no time to lease all of our lands and shift to Dhaka. And what had happened to our father's dearly loved wood-built house? Now they are occupied by a bunch of servants who sit cross-legged all day long and snore loudly at night. All the fruits in the orchard and fish in the pond are solely in their right. All the furniture, even the chairs and tables are mere gimcrack. Dry leaves are heaped all over the yard. Perhaps the cattle are also gone. Visiting this ramshackle house would in no way uphold his dignity to his friends. Upon their arrival in the morning, when they walked in a room, they saw a colony of thin white worms moving here and there, even on chairs and tables. His friends were terrified and said in English, 'Dangerous!' Abdul was tidying up the mess. Seeing them scared he courageously said, 'Parul poka- creeps about where rice is stored.' Parul poka- hearing this graceful feminine name his friends looked intently on the worm's slack moves in lustful eyes. Latif himself has forgotten all those names, those distinct entities of worms and all those indigenous species of flora and fauna. And why not? It has been years since he was sent to school in Dhaka at secondary level. The village has since been obliterated, together with its fields and dusty earthen roads. And this tight gins, trainer shoes, foreign T-shirt do they make any sense in this murky place? Thus dressed up in modern clothing, one would surely lose his standing if he were to face so many bedraggled brutes in the steady light of the lantern.

--' Chhoto mia, please tell us something,' says one of the distinct voices sitting in front of him.

Latif fumbles for words to say something against this

frail request. All the same, he winds up turning the question of his involvement over and over in his mind. Why should he be plunged into this worthless affair? What does he know about agriculture, let alone the construction of a dam, which they say is necessary to protect the crops from the submerging flow of saline water? Whether or where it should be built has nothing to do with him whatsoever. Above all, why should he be responsible for settling this? He's here to have some fun with his friends and they will be gone in a day or two. Some questions like this begin to hammer in his head which then leap outside making his voice as stubborn as ever, 'I don't know anything. If you think it's okay, go ahead.'

After this curt answer, Latif wishes to leave. He's had enough of this. Looking over his shoulder he gazes into the dark. But how strange, he thinks, they are not taking off! Rather one or two of them are smoking biri secretly with their legs stretched. Should he tell them off? If he doesn't, may be they will say, 'Please, give us some food.' These ill-mannered people have got no respect for others. If they had, they would never make this nuisance to force their obduracy on him.

--' Choto mia, I'd like to say something with your permission'

Here they go again. Nevertheless a highly irritated Latif attends to the speaker. A long-bearded man with a dishevelled face and a handloom napkin draped over his shoulder starts to whimper that does not make any sense. Someone from behind pinches on his back and he comes forward wiping his face with the napkin.

--'We're saying that all the land along the canal belongs to you. To build up the dam, we'll have to dig your land to collect soil. Now what do you say?'

Anything regarding the land seems so complicated to Latif. He is overly in the dark about how much land they own or what the locations are. Nor does he intend to know. With the picture of a plot of land comes the filthy mud-smeared scum. He shudders as though he were drowning into it. Thus mired in this uncomfortable situation, he sees one of his friends rush off from inside and say hastily with impatience in his voice, 'Hurry up. We're waiting for you.' Then he retreats inside. Hearing him speak English which to them is an ever unfathomable mystery, they all exchange looks and keep whispering.

--'He must be your friend?' A thin voice asks and Latif nods.

--'He's also coming from Dhaka?' Now the man is trying to be familiar which exasperates Latif. Yet he remains cool and nods again.

--'May be they'll stay?' asks the man throwing Latif off balance. Why on earth do they care so much about his friends? How he loathes this prying curiosity of these lower-class people! Inside his friends are becoming restless. By now they were supposed to have two rounds of drinks and rouse the wild rhythm of the harem all over their body and nerves, whereas he is frittering his time away on these silly talks. In a move to get away, he says decisively, 'You must be off now. And do whatever you like.'

Even after the clear hint of being ousted, they remain still as if they are used to such bullies, as if their skin has grown to be a hardened shell of some kind. In the dull flame of the hurricane they are sitting with their heads and shoulders pressed against each other.

--'Why's everybody still sitting?' Thunder strikes in Latif's voice.

--'We're just saying what if your elder brothers don't put up with the idea of digging your soil?'

Latif finally loses his temper and sweeps the whole yard with angry shouts, 'How dare you? My permission is final. Now get lost.'

They get on their feet instantly making a noisy fuss. Some shadows look tall, some short. The unearthly shape of their shadows taken together seem to be poised like a swarm of bats that will fly off the ground anytime and start dancing in the air. The stillness of the dark is pierced by their gratified voice, contented at the fulfilment of their demand.

Latif also stands up, and then sits back. The old wooden chair makes a screeching sound. Wrinkling his eyebrows, he looks into the dark and sees somebody still stuck, sitting mutely on his heels. He holds up the hurricane to make sure. Seeing Latif raise the flame, the person moves forward slithering slowly like an idle earth-worm. Staring at him in the dim light, Latif trembles and averts his eyes hastily in the dark. Was he also sitting with those unyielding people so far? What to do now? After all these years Latif feels embarrassed to look him in the face again and wonders how he would address. As school chums they used to refer to each other by 'thou'. Now what? Seven long years have passed by. Should he greet him like a friend, like he does with his dhakaite pals? His mind wavers and splits up. All his fun is going to be messed up. No more of this

shit. He'll catch the first launch tomorrow and head back to Dhaka. Never again into this dirty village, he swears. Does it matter whether they have some property in this god-forsaken place where straggling bushes are growing all over. He does not care a straw if this house breaks down. Hearing someone moan opposite him, he gives the man a cursory glance and is astonished. Is this the Fazlu with whom he went to school till class nine? Such a horrendous appearance! He is looking like a cage made of bones. His clavicle seems to stick out. And Latif is almost appalled at the sight of his sharp bones in the ribs, tending to stick out as pointedly as the bars of a prison. Already bald, his head has assumed an odd shape like the hard inside of a coconut. His eyes seem at first to glisten, but then fades in the hollows of the half-moon formed under his eyes. Latif examines him while a docile voice speaks.

--'You recognise me, Sir?'

Latif cannot talk back. In fact, Latif fails to fix it in his head whether the man facing him is real or a dark ghost in the shape of a starving man. He is interrupted further by a sudden gust of wind coming from the north and raising a ruffling sound in the trees. The timid lantern flame blazes up. Dried leaves shedding from the branches are making a rustling sound in the orchard. The scary front yard surrounded merely by darkness sends shiver over Latif. Yet he attempts to wear off all fears and says, 'Why're you addressing me like that?' Fazlu sits on the ground to take a deep breath, as if to recover the last reserve of his strength for the talk. 'You people live in cities. But I don't even get to eat some time.' Then he lifts up his trembling hands, makes a circle with his stick-like fingers, and points it to his lips. Latif is apt enough to decipher the meaning of this gesture. The hunger of this poor skull of a man, he thinks, can never be appeased, even if he tears up the village gloatingly with his dirty nails and eats up the whole. Suddenly Laif is terrified at the thought of being assaulted. What if he clutches at his throat and bites him? Putting aside Fazlu and his carnal appetite, he tries to change the subject, 'Tell me about the village.' But then he wonders if it is really worth talking; and realises that the scrawny figure of Fazlu is wedged in his head. And he says,

--'Fazlu, what has happened to you?'

Latif cannot spot his sunken eyes. All he sees is Fazlu's right hand lifted over his forehead to make that gesture again. When his hand comes slowly down making a crackling of bones, it sounds like the peeled skin of a Banana falling roughly on the ground. When he talks, it sounds like his jawbones crush. Something is being cooked. 'I'll wait.' He sniffs at the tempting smell that makes his pallid face look bright and swallows back the saliva like he was taking a long sip of some luscious soup. But Latif smells new trouble.

All these mishaps keep happening ever since he stepped down from the launch this morning. Now this irritating presence of a wretched Fazlu is utterly spoiling his drinking mood.

-- 'You better go in, I'll be waiting,' Fazlu stretches his skinny body over the ground, as if to make his stand.

All of a sudden the tangled knots in Latif's head are untied, and new thoughts spawn. He takes out the wallet from his back pocket, and looks for a small note. But alas, all the changes are gone. Only the hundred taka notes are available. Is it any good to give away a hundred taka note to him? What does he know about its worth? Suddenly a deafening growl generates from somewhere behind and sends his nerves on the edge. Looking behind he sees Abdul lifting one of his giant legs threateningly in the air while his ogre eyes flare up in rage- 'Get lost you hungry monster. Or I'll stamp you to death.' In order to find some support in this situation, perhaps consolation, Fazlu looks to Latif in pathetic eyes. But Latif turns his eyes away. And Abdul starts again, this time with renewed energy manifest in his contemptuous howl. Seeing Abdul thus intimidating, Fazlu stands on his feet trembling like a shadow. Latif cannot wait to see whether he tumbles down out of fear or hunger or weakness. Putting his hands into the side-pockets, he disappears into the house and storms into the room where his friends are waiting. First he takes a long sip at someone else's glass half-full with wine despite the burning sensation inside his throat and stomach. 'What happened Mr Landlord?' one of his friends asks in English with sarcastic undertone, who then invites all in a muffled voice to dance with an English song. Latif weaves a deep sigh in the hope to bury this awkward meeting, but Fazlu's cage of bones, gasping face, his bony hand lifted over his mouth with his fingers circling into that indelible gesture and his ever-insatiate dry tongue are all that invincibly rise before his eyes. He holds out his hand for another glass to erase Fazlu and his prison house altogether.

POETRY

For poetry...

ATIKA CHERRY

Words are broken
Letters are scattered
Of our poems- They cried
For their human heart shaped home-
No one knows-

You showed no mercy
I didn't give it a try
We left them for
The world to justify!

They are masterpieces
(An orphan, no one knows)
I cry for them in the bath
The tap screams louder though-

Let's work
To give them homes again
Not in the real world, no matter at all
Let's paint our poetic world

To laugh, to make our poems
unconditional.

Morning

RAFIQUL ISLAM RIME

Toothbrush, shaving foam and the
Poison after shave,
Toast and Tea
With a white egg and marmalade,
Shakespeare, Eliot and Dostoyevsky
Shoved into the bag that I carry.

With a last and sharp look in the mirror
I took the handset, and looked around for a
kiss . .

My one and a half year old daughter
Came up with a book in hand
And said, "naw" in her milky trend.

I turned and kissed her cheek and took the
book
"Introducing Existentialism" inscription on
it,
Made me a cool fool
With a fleeting yet terminal curiosity I took a
deep look,
And I dashed for the door,
Time is core.

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Grievance of a poetess

FARHA DIBA

For many days...I do not seem to belong
to me...
For many days...I do not see the poetess
in me...

Why is it that you...though belonging to
me...never really listen to me...

You defy me when I need you...
But you lock yourself in my grip when I
do not desire you...

Why is it that you...though belonging to
me...make me belong to you...

In search of verses...now and then...
I get lost in sanguine reverie...
I rummage through the old chest of the
past in gossamer and dust...
I strain my ears to hear the mumble of
the earth...
I force my eyes to have glimpses beyond
my sight...

Still...
You are the only one...who makes my
mind comprehensible...
You are the only one...who makes me a
writer...

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Poems from

RUBAB ABDULLAH SHUKLA
Life: You And I

When you speak, I heed
When you sigh, I gasp
When you cry, I perk up
What you see, I draw
How you sense, I comprehend
While you touch, I shiver
Where you end, I initiate

Striving

Love to you, my friend
You are truly peerless . . .
Simply sanctified with
Abundance
Love, blessing, intellectual
Adherence . . .
Whatever you impart to me
I strive to pay back
Even more
You solely drive me in
Whatever you acknowledge
From me