

VISITING DOVE COTTAGE

A dream come true

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA

Often in my dreams the soul had frequented my favourite Romantic Poet, William Wordsworth's Dove Cottage, where he, with his family and sister Dorothy lived. Being a student of English literature, it was only fair I should spend time and money to visit it. In London not long ago, I decided to venture out on the mission in company with some others.

It was pretty cloudy, occasionally drizzling, a perfect set-up for my rendezvous. In such a state of ecstasy I had absolutely forgotten my fellow- travellers! They had been pushed completely in the back-ground!

There I was, imagining myself in the Victorian era, dressed up in those long gowns, tight at the midriff, my hair tied up high, adorned with a beautiful lace-flowery hat. It was a mad lover taken over by a spell of haste, to meet her paramour, after ages of separation! It was quite early in the morning when we set out. Already the countryside was spreading a kind of aura all over me.

The passing green valleys and the white clouds reminded me of his famous poem The Daffodils.....'I wandered lonely as a cloud, that floats high over vales and hills'...the smooth, silk-like roads helped me to dream without encountering any bumps! The grey-tiled cottages, smoke coming through the chimney-tops fitted exactly with the picture I had in mind. It was summer, all the reason for the bewitching; for alluring flowers to bloom in the mini gardens, which "garnished" the approach to the stone- boundary cottages. Tall trees were in abundance, as if God had built only one paradise and that was the Lake District and the road to Dove Cottage. The sight of daffodils took me years back to my childhood, when I first got acquainted with Wordsworth, given the task to recite The Daffodils. I still remember.... "The wealth the show had brought, It became my bliss of solitude." We drove on, my heart skipping a beat as I suddenly spotted a sign which read...

'THE WORDSWORTH TRUST
DOVE COTTAGE
'100 YDS



The writer in Wordsworth country

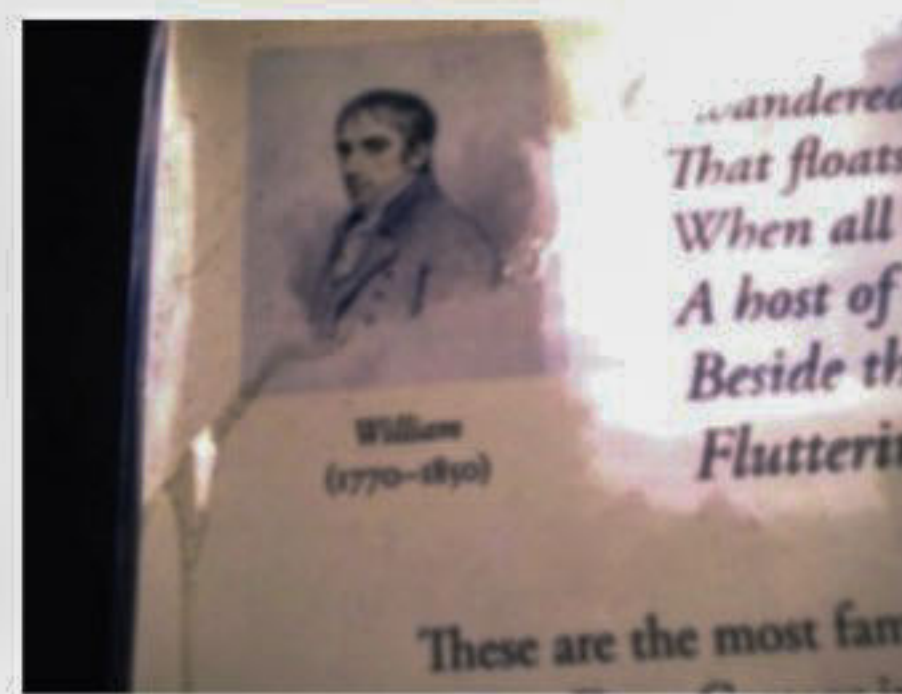
Now I felt sure the sound of my heart thumping could be heard from afar. We got down from the bus and walked a bit to reach Dove Cottage. And there stood the signboard ...ROMANTIC POETS, ROMANTIC PLACES.' With a small inscription Wordsworth Trust.

I pinched myself to see if I was day-dreaming! "Hurry". I came to myself only to realize I had fallen far behind in the queue. As I stood there my mind registered every little detail. Once inside, we were requested not to take photographs and to take the few seats they had. We were the only Bangladeshis. A couple of Indians were there. The rest were British.

The Wordsworths' dining room was now the living room for visitors, with a humble fireplace in the corner. I chose the window seat overlooking the garden which Dorothy's finger had so fondly touched! A feast for the eyes, the orange poppies were in full bloom, not to mention the famous daffodils. Meanwhile, the guide was constantly narrating incidents of that time. Their favourite friends were Thomas de

Quincy, S.T.Coleridge and Robert Southey. We were then ushered into a room where hung a painting by Lord Beaumont bearing witness to the sad demise at sea of Wordsworth's brother John. "In fact it was an elegy" was the guide's comment. We were then escorted to an amazing discovery ...the butlery! It was built over a stream to keep it cold so that stores could remain fresh for two weeks at a stretch. The wash basin used is now back in vogue. They had to pay six shillings for extra light for lamps which they termed as daylight robbery. We were now in the bedroom watching a small bed and a small suitcase set aside. But what caught our attention was the unusual sixty-six visas pasted on the door, displaying his importance! What was more surprising was his French passport!

The guide went on to say ...his sister Dorothy used to prepare bread for William every morning and pack it for his journey. Dorothy became his companion, friend, moral support and housekeeper, till her physical and mental decline. It was a



custom that if a daughter was unmarried, the family took care of her till her death. William took very good care of her. The death of John strongly affected the entire family, and they moved to Rydal Mount, Ambleside, where he spent the rest of his life. The guide narrated how William had met Coleridge and along with Southey they became a strong trio. After Robert Southey died in 1843, Wordsworth was made Poet Laureate in 1850. These three friends were named the Lake Poets. The guide continued, but I had had my fill for the day. While standing in the queue, I had spied an arrow pointed towards the museum and the bookstore and was impatient to see it, so I begged leave, stepping a few yards to buy myself a ticket.

Once inside, I noticed that there were plenty of things of interest. At the bookshop I was about to pick a rare collection but when I got to know the exorbitant price I just let it go. Instead, I bought two quills and postcards as souvenirs. There was provision for you to listen to the life history of the Wordsworths, using headphones, and there I was, back again with them!

The long desired tour ended with a lot of fulfillment and contentment, enjoying every moment of it, though, a few minutes that I lingered for a last look led us to missing the first bus! Because of me, the others suffered the walk for the next bus. On the way back, it began to drizzle again, ferrying me back to the make-believe world of William Wordsworth.....now, happy and complete. Back home, I thanked the Almighty profusely for making a dream come true!

MOHSENA REZA SHOPNA IS A SOCIAL ACTIVIST AND WRITES POETRY.

POETRY

The Final Goal

NAHREEN RAHMAN

The day I was born
I knew,
I am not like others
I may look like them
But I am not one of them
Since the world made me realise
I am inferior to them
For what they can do
Cannot be done by me
As I am less than them

My world, my family and friends
My eye opener
My guide
Who thinks I am a curse to them
An embarrassment to them
A shame to them
Gave me courage
To confront the reality
That no matter wherever I go to seek help
I'll always stand in the place where I stood before
Since to the world
I am known as a retard
According to whom I am insane
And mentally unfit
Even though my mother thinks
I am not what the world thinks me to be
But I know what I am
What I can do
And what I cannot do
For I know I am not like the rest

Ever since my childhood
I have been the skateboard of the millions
Regardless, their mocking gestures
Hostility and misbehaviour
There was one thing common in their eyes
That not only made me feel inferior
To the inhuman butchers
Who know nothing
Apart from killing one's hopes and dreams
Mirrored me
As an alien
As though I am something whom they have never seen
And should be put in the museum
Since I am the sufferer of dyslexia
Yet,
I promise you all
In spite of my drawbacks
In spite of my hardships
And in spite of my pain
That boosts my heart to be a rock
To hit back the obstacles
In my way
To reach the goal
To prove myself one day
To be better than you all
Superior to you all,
There will be a time
A day
When I'll look down upon you all
While you'll all look upon me
Just the way you see me today
For time what it is waits for none
And history what it is
That never forgets to repeat

NAHREEN RAHMAN IS A STUDENT OF ECONOMICS AT NORTH SOUTH UNIVERSITY

FICTION

The burden of existence

SARWAR UDDIN

A thousand ethereal beings gathered together to watch a spectacle unfold near an unmanned, almost deserted rail crossing, not far from the nearby station. Among them were several witches burned at the stake in the latter part of the seventeenth century in a European village. Also present were the spirits of some women whose souls had been saved with their dead husbands in a village on the Ganges basin.

These saved souls had congregated in that particular place to see another of their kindred soul being saved, along with two nascent souls, two of her children. The older one was an eight year old boy and the younger one a girl of five. The woman herself was about 25 years of age, of an average height with a gaunt body; her two children also bore signs of emaciation.

"Where are we going, mum?" said the boy, as they were walking on an unpaved road on a winter evening, with heavy fog limiting their visual distance.

"To your cousin's", she answered briefly.

Given the nature of her journey and its ultimate aim, she seemed unusually calm. It seemed as if her thought processes had become suspended. Perhaps it would be an excellent thing getting rid of one's emotions in the mindless workings of the mindless universe.

She was moving on calmly to her desired destination until her daughter interrupted her.

"Mum, are we going to stay there for long?" she asked her with as much tenderness in her voice as could be possible in the uncorrupted world in which children are accustomed to live.

The mother remained silent.

There were several fresh scars on her face and from her gait it could be discerned that she was also suffering from severe leg injuries. Biting cold, accompanied by sustained chilly winds, seemed not to have any effect on her. But the children frequently shivered as their clothes seemed to be grossly inadequate to withstand the cold.

Several minutes later, the woman reached a fork in the road, with one of the roads leading to her birth house and the other to the crossing, where she was about to end her painful procession of life. Seeing the road, her memories suddenly revived, she resumed her thought processes and began to sob silently.

II

The name of this nightly voyager into

witchdom is Nurjahan Begum. She was the fourth child of her parents. Her father, Abdus Sukkur, was a poor village farmer who died fighting for his country's independence, leaving the family helpless. Her mother, Kulsuma Akhter, struggled to run the family.

Gripped by poverty, Nurjahan could hardly entertain any romantic feelings in her young age. Yet closer inspection would reveal that she had no fewer strings or hidden throbs in her heart. She was the prettiest girl in the village. Despite the poor and dirty existence she led, one could still see the veins running through her skin. She hoped to capitalize on her beauty and secure a bright future wedding, with a well-to-do husband. But all her hopes were dashed when her mother married her off at thirteen to a day labourer double her age.

Work was scarce and her husband, Rashid Mia, could barely eke out an existence. He would go to work in the morning and return at midday, only to depart after lunch. Returning in the evening, he would go out again to the bazaar where he used to meet his fellow day-labourers and try to find the next day's work. Sometimes he succeeded but oftentimes, he returned un-hired, being forced to ration out his meager income.

Despite all the hardships, Rashid Mia managed to run his family and lead a relatively happy conjugal life. In the twelve years of her married life, she bore her husband three children. One of them died two months after birth but the other two had managed to survive.

Things were going well until someone's gaze rested upon Rashid Mia's beautiful wife.

Abbas Uddin came into Rashid Mia's house on a winter afternoon. She treated him just like a neighbour and conversed with him. As a matter of courtesy, she invited him to visit them again.

Abbas considered her innocent behaviour to be a sign of fallibility and continued to visit her, mostly while her husband was away at work. With the increasing regularity of Abbas's visit swelled the suspicion of her husband and curiosity of the villagers. A profound distrust developed between the two and Rashid Mia gave his wife some final words of warning.

"You cannot certainly flirt with someone else while remaining my wife; next time I see you talking to him, things will turn dangerous. Mark my words!" he warned.

Nurjahan tried to protest her innocence but to no avail. Rashid Mia had turned a deaf

ear to her.

"You can tell him not to come anymore. Why do you blame me for something I have nothing to do with?" she said.

Rashid Mia had already left for the bazaar.

The next evening, when Rashid Mia returned home after toiling the whole day in the field, he saw his wife cooking rice on the open hearth and the man, keeping some distance, sat by the fireside. The children were also out there playing hide and seek in the yard.

In a fit of anger, he chased the man away and when he was gone, uttered a powerful word three times.

"talak, talak, talak", he uttered.

The sky, which she assumed to be nothing more than a mere rooftop, fell heavily upon her. Finding no alternative, she left for her paternal home that very same evening.

Two months went by when her husband returned to bring her. She had no alternative but to go.

But secret and bad things never remain secret and once they ultimately come out, they spread like wildfire, engulfing the minds of people in its trails.

Without wasting much time, the village elders assembled to discuss the matter and punish the couple for the adultery they had committed after having their marriage annulled by God's law.

Proud of their wisdom, which they call "ancient wisdom" that cannot be wrong, and strengthened by the inviolable laws of God, the village elders summoned the couple to a place which had already attained some fame for such proceedings.

Curious crowds of villagers had begun to converge at the place long before the trial started. The allegation of adultery had been decisively proved and the jury delivered their verdict.

"A hole is to be dug, she is to be lowered, and stoned one hundred and one times," the verdict read.

Preparations were complete within a short time and she was lowered. After receiving the sixtieth stone, she fainted. But in order for her to be absolved of her sins, she must receive the remaining stones. Such were the purifying powers of stones that they filled the remaining space in the pit, burying her sins under the rubble; and when she was resurrected a short time later, she emerged innocent as a baby.

After absolving her of her sins and bringing

her up from her purifying place, the village elders and clerics declared her to be married again with another man and then divorced in order to live with Rashid Mia.

The village elders left the scene one by one, seemingly content with their performance in the soul-saving mission.

Enough meaning of life had been imparted to her. She had intimately known existence and whatever meaning attached to it. Now she had decided to unload the burden of this existence.

III
Death, when it comes like a flash of lightning, is like the trampling of an ant --- atoms disintegrating, mingling with other atoms, and matter losing consciousness.

About ten minutes are yet to go until the next express crosses the crossing and takes three souls with it. Nurjahan Begum had almost arrived at the crossing but suddenly she stopped, paused for a moment, and then hugged her children. She was still shedding silent tears but she also seemed circumspect enough not to let her children understand anything about the coming event. Multi-chambered, thin-layered compartments of the human mind are too frail to keep one kind of emotion seeping into another.

She tried to justify accompanying her children on her journey. "They are, after and above all, my halves. Together they make my other self", she convinced herself.

"It is just a few seconds, all will be over then; death will come unannounced to them, lasting just a moment". She tried to differentiate between the two kinds of death, her own death and the deaths of her kids.

It seemed that the sooner the train came, the better. It was hard to resist the bombardment of memories of a lifetime. Memories are another cargo yoked to the wagon of life.

She finally reached the point she had wished for. None was in sight. Given the presence of dense fog and biting cold, there was little possibility that anyone would cross the point and even if someone was to thread it, his eyesight would certainly be evaded by the surroundings. Nurjahan moved a little bit northward and sat on the track. She told her children to take some rest, tied their clothes with her sari and began to wait. She had taken full preparations to tie their souls to the train and all she could do now was wait for its arrival.

After a few moments, the headlights of a coming train began to pierce the dense fog.

She did not need to worry about the track because it was a single track railway. She took the heads of her kids in her breast and began to comb their hair.

Hardly did she know that she was going to add a new twist to the billion years legacy of wanting to live a bit longer, perhaps a little bit, at all costs.

IV
Several expresses had crossed the point before a dairyman discovered the trio. People began to throng the place to have a look at them. Word finally reached Rashid Mia, who immediately rushed to the spot and arranged for the bodies to be taken home.

When the news of the incident spread to the village, a flurry of condemnation began to circulate. The village elders were still more stunned by her impiety.

"She is as impious in death as she was in life", opined one middle-aged man.

"Doomed to hell", announced the lead cleric. "It is a grave sin, mother of all sins", he added.

"She cannot be buried in the usual manner", the clerics decreed.

"God's laws shall prevail". The village elders reached unanimity.

In two days' time, another digging was conducted and Nurjahan Begum was once again lowered. Due to the size of the hole, she could not be lowered upright; she was somehow squeezed and the hired men hastily filled the hole. Her two children received more ceremonial burials as they were the victims of their mother's impiety.

The next morning the villagers awoke to find a lock of hair in the nearby field which had apparently been unearthed by some wild animals. It was fluttering in the winter breeze. The hair, which one cleric recommended to be cut in public for her impiety but was later saved in favour of stoning, had finally made its journey from the shallow grave.

Rumours were in circulation for quite some days that a white-clothed woman was haunting the village. Mothers warned their children not to go out alone after sundown. But the rumours had also subsided in due course and everything became normal. Apart from this, her death failed to cause any stir in the overall workings of the village, and the universe is certainly far bigger.

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