

**MUSINGS**

**REFLECTIONS**

Why poetry matters ...

Lasting Impressions...

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

Poetry is always about the human condition. Or you could say it is the story of the individual in terms of a broader connection with the collective body of men and women going through the pains and passions on which life comes as an offering to them. Yes, poetry is often a happy reflection of the turns and twists of the heart, of the rhythms which inject meaning into existence. More often than not, though, it is the breaking heart which reveals itself searingly through poetic imagery.

The recently dead Wislawa Szymborska put it in perspective. She was a weaver of quiet passion and in that silence of hers she stumbled upon a certain rebellious streak in her. Observe that rebellion:  
*I believe in the refusal to take part  
I believe in the ruined career  
I believe in the wasted years of work  
I believe in the secret taken to the grave*  
And there you have a certain peek into the nature of poetry. It is all about the secret pain, the unrevealed agony which torments you deep inside your soul. You have loved, and you have paid the price of that love. Or perhaps you might have turned away from the love of one for whom absolute devotion to you, to the principle of love, was all? Rejection often results in a lengthening of misery. Sometimes it coils itself into a curse, as Donne would have you know:

*When by thy scorn, O murderers, I am dead*

*And that thou thinkest thee free from all Solicitations from me,  
Then shall my ghost come to thy bed  
And thee in worse arms shall see.  
Then thy sick taper will begin to wink ...*  
One must be battered by rejection many times over to be able to come forth with such eloquent bitterness. Donne does it and, like him, so many others. Anna Akhmatova was a double victim of pain, first at the hands of the authoritarian state which took intense pleasure in tormenting the likes of her; and then from an internal bleeding caused by the greyness of her surroundings. She went looking for love, was probably not quite ready to be spurned, even if subtly. Watch the sadness as it drips from her:

*I cannot say if it is our love,  
Or the day, that is ending.*

It is a loaded statement here, testimony once again to the greatest joy and the biggest sadness that love can cause to unfold on our lives. But then steps into

the picture Rabindranath Tagore, with his mystical poetry, almost as if to inform you that beyond this life there is promise of the infinity. The cloud and the night come in fusion. To what purpose? Observe yet again:

*The cloud has said, 'I shall go',  
The night has said, 'I go ...'  
The sea sings, 'I have found the shore;  
I am no more.'*

It is the happy burial of the self in a larger, spiritual Self which comes through in these thoughts. Poetry is a constant reminder that at the end of the day life does not matter. Nothing matters but the end, the finality of our moments on earth. And yet before the end is nigh, it is the purity of romance that must be at play:

*I shall sing you a song  
That is why you keep me awake  
A stirring plays in my bosom  
O you who awake my sadness  
I shall sing you a song.*

Desolation is not what you spot here, for in Tagore it is the optimism beyond the known which is at constant play. But poetry will not function without the bleak, without the heart-breaking. TS Eliot warns you that he will show you fear in a handful of dust. Of course, the theme has built up from a seedling of a thought. Eliot leaves little question of being ambiguous:

*I grow old, I grow old  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.*

That is, again, a picture of the prematurely old, struggling Indian peasant, toiling from sun-up to sundown, Somerset Maugham painted once. The irony is always at work in the world of poetry. Even as poetry grows, the individual shrinks. Eliot's Prufrock speaks for the shrinking individual:

*I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.*

Poetry, then, makes you wonder at the various contradictions which assail the soul. Perhaps much more than that, it brings sadness in its wake, indeed symbolizes sadness, enough to punch holes in an already bleeding heart. William Butler Yeats gives you that wounded heart:

*When you old and gray and full of sleep  
And nodding by the fire, take down this book  
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look  
Your eyes had once and of their shadows deep;*

*How many loved your moments of glad grace,  
And loved your beauty with love false or*

*true;  
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,  
And loved the sorrows of your changing face.*

And love is what lights up the path in Faiz Ahmed Faiz's landscape of the soul:

*With the crack of dawn was spread in the sky  
The roseate of your cheeks,  
And with nightfall came down the cascade*

*Of your tresses on the world's face.*  
Across the landscape of poetry, there are the whispers of mortality we hear. All glory is fleeting, says the poet. The grave levels all. Thomas Gray points you to the darkness beyond life, to the grave which has collapsed in rain and wind through the centuries:

*The paths of glory lead but to the grave.*  
It is at such turnings of the ancient crossroads of life and death that you recall Syed Khwaja Moinul Hassan, the flames of anguish spiralling out of his heart:

*Like a candle each second melting down  
I am dying at the top  
This night, it's my night,  
It's my time in history;  
Tomorrow brings the light of another day*

Which only has Pablo Neruda walk over to you, to stamp on your soul that familiar tale of lost love:

*We have lost even this twilight.  
No one saw us this evening hand in hand  
While the blue light dropped on the world.*

*I have seen from my window  
The fiesta of sunset in the distant Mountain tops.*

*Sometimes a piece of sun  
Burned like a coin in my hand.  
I remembered you with my soul clenched  
In that sadness of mine that you know.*

Poetry rises in the ripple of a stream. It awakens on nights battered by the monsoon. It takes shape in the lowering of the coffin into the grave.

Poetry is then reborn in the laughter of the woman you met aeons ago. 'Why did you rouse me from sleep?' She asks in soft happiness. You brood on the times when she and you will be shards of memory. Poetry for you, again? The winds will not answer.

(World Poetry Day was observed on 21 March).

SYED BADRUL AHSAN EDITS STAR LITERATURE AND STAR BOOKS REVIEW.

AINON N.

My ideas are not rushed when I account my thoughts on paper with a fountain pen. There is a balance in coordinating the pause and etching the final words on a page. I can be as extravagant or as stringent with words at my heart's will. Today that art of penning seems to be on its way to complete oblivion. We live in a world of quick notes and abbreviated messages that leave behind many unsaid thoughts. The pen and ink are lost to time and have become collectibles. Today's hurried age is an age of instant information, disposable sensibilities and thoughts abandoned midway.

Eons ago, I recall setting time aside to write



letters, an exercise I conducted deep into the night. The moment to sit and write was purely mine, to connect with the person whose eyes would sift through my message. I would select the writing pad of my choice, and then decide on black or blue ink. Carefully I would dip my pen into the ink bottle to fill its tube, lest I decided to carry on a long discourse, so to say. The Muse in me pondered on the first few sentences. It was the beginning of a narration that would convey my pensive, upbeat or angry mood, an excerpt from the happenings of mine and my surroundings. So, I would pause to think, and then begin carefully. As the thoughts unveiled, the tip of my pen carefully choreographed my expressions on paper. Mellow, patient, confident were the words of advice. Rustic, exciting, inviting were the words of friendship. Soft, of reverence were words of love. And from there on it was undivided attention, spending quality time if you will, with that person. What, you may ask, evoked these reflections? Well, here is what happened...

I discovered in my pile of throwaways a bundle of letters. Casually I opened one, and then another and another! The pages had turned rustic yellow, a few were disintegrating on the seam, the writings were faded, but the words and their message remained elegantly simple. All written by hand, in blue ink, some twenty years ago, a few even earlier. I laughed, cried, read and reread. The writer's pen was alive and active, and her range of thoughts was a quest to have the distance between us become shorter. Each letter had a story to tell. During the days of the 1971 war how we left our home and sought shelter elsewhere! At that point in time our needs were meager but our love and concerns were abundant. The writer in her disciplined observation took time to account the compassion of people with whom we had shared a roof. And thus as an adult for me it was a story to reflect on the goodness of others in times of need, reminding me of the deep values we each carry in us that often become blurred to the demands of the mundane.

And then there was the story of selflessness, a part of her which I took for granted. She was a teacher to the children of her village home; was the bank for many women of her community; was the counselor who helped several to ease through the rigours of family life. And then again there was the gentle finesse with which she informed me about her failing health due to cancer, her decision to live life with grace, opting for a natural ending. With it came the most precious sentence on how it is okay to let go! In her dignified way she laid the foundation of my very own moral principles anchoring me to life, to know life for what it is. I have learned many lessons through her handwritten letters. In these missives I listened to her voice, traceable to my childhood through my coming of age. For us it was quality time then, and quality time now, even so many years later. In her letters I have discovered compassion, patience of mind and gems of unconditional love that make life meaningful. And along the way on many occasions made the sun shine brighter than usual.

Ironically, today the significance of a handwritten letter hews up as a bullet point on the communications expert list --- a skill to be trained on, a value we need to be reminded of!

AINON N, WHO LIVES AND WORKS IN CARBONDALE, ILLINOIS, USA, IS CURRENTLY ON A VISIT TO BANGLADESH.

**POEMS**

The Discarded Prisoner

AINON N.

The burning eyes  
Of ferocious history  
The old face inquired  
What wrong do I represent?  
What form am I?  
His inquisition  
Gripped massacre by its throat  
Pressed sums of living  
Into the quicksand of riot  
War the determinist  
Is of injustice or justice?  
Answers for him I had none  
The scale of fairness  
Weighs a question mark

They took him  
Casualty of war  
Not of death  
But living enclosed  
The why lingers  
Nine score months  
A little moment  
In hugeness of seventy some years  
Yet wisdom and principles  
Left to cold decay  
Home lost to him  
The burdened humanity

Burning rage  
From his silence  
To my speech  
The commandment  
For one, war of right  
For other, war of wrong  
For all, annihilation  
The musings of soothsayers  
Blessed are the warriors  
Such proclamation  
Counterfeit reality  
Scorned by truth  
What vile, what audacity!  
In the passing  
Incidental became his right

My neighbour

RUBANA HUQ

(A verse in protest of the border killings)

A big fat man with a beer belly and  
unflinching eyeballs  
Sits across my porch, with a gun half  
his size  
Kills and stuffs the dead up in his  
cellar along with his wine  
While, from my window, I keep a  
count of his kill...  
Even a sparrow flying by his skies  
Prompts a bullet in an apparently  
defensive reflex

My neighbor,  
A passionately obsessive, obese  
hunter  
Lacks lashes, never blinks  
Perennially positioned and cloned  
In all four sides of his wires  
Trigger happy, he collects the fallen  
Trophies for his vintage greed...  
While I drench my ground with grief  
Burning shrines down with shame  
Defying faith and honor.

Fatigue clouds

SHOKHORE ANTONY ROZARIO

Today it is not the thunder that makes  
me shiver,  
The sigh of dark fatigue clouds chasing  
the wind  
Trigger a hostile sense to my loneliness.  
Heavy, tired but forsaken clouds ran-  
domly collide,  
For she needs to rain, she needs to  
relieve the pain;  
For ages she carried the mist that once  
evaporated;  
Evolved life to saturated asylum;  
Yet, is she destined to burst as a few  
droplets?  
Or has her desire toughened to rain my  
thirsty lips?

The walk of the vagabond, nourish on  
the carcass Sahara,  
Whilst my fatigue clouds pour upon the  
mirage in alluvial paradise;  
Thunder down as Nile onto the stream-  
ing flow.  
Blessed are the inhabitants, who not  
recall the last weep of the pharaoh,  
Raise thy chin- The King will live! The  
Nile will sing!  
For years she had darkened the conur-  
bation;  
Evolved populace to worship the gods;  
Yet, is she destined to hose the earth,  
Or would she charm her munificent  
interest?

Oh! I hear her roar, I hear in her tremor  
the memories,  
I'd rather not speak, for my words are  
defiant, to embody her essay.  
As I stand in my loggia, to relax in the  
taste of coffee,  
A mystic feeling to get drenched in this  
blessed shower, my fantasy.  
I have longed to dance at her Joyce and  
rinse in her vigour;  
But pardon my extravagance, must I  
refrain from all leisure?  
Evolved in this agony, today I pensively  
drench in her rain;  
Yet, is my fatigue cloud a rumble on my  
misery sail?  
Or is she a seraph, waiting to embrace  
me in heaven?

Soothsayer

SEEMA NUSRAT AMIN

'They believe laughter, laughter is the  
seventh layer...'  
Soothsayer,  
give me visions of the feast...  
A blue-eyed horse,  
spinning within five columns, such that  
his waves become friction  
for the eyes playing  
circular stone and air hide and seek,  
burgundy scabs light the night discolor-

ation of the skin  
A backless orange form, skipping  
through the wider circumference  
is pulled back in, halfway 'round.

there are blindfolds, and the End-Times  
are as light-footed as night watchmen  
sheds imagined, or dogging cars, or  
tigers, in cemeteries by cathedrals,  
where monks burn a slow fire, orange-  
flamed blood-leaf

And  
I prefer to watch your back,  
tied to me by a blindfold loosely done,  
in a whim we'd conspired to  
stretch, like one of those lunges  
over some pole, bench, obstacle,  
horse that you are,  
and the seventh layer of the soul  
drops in temperature, to the green-black  
sweet-heat similitude in coolness,  
and I let the goose bump scarf down,  
Your face a gray flame-the body is in  
danger of undergoing a change of state,  
going gas, going water,  
I tinkle from the leaking pulse  
of the loins, to the dry throat  
inside the hobo's sex-sun straddle,  
that knows penetration is an illusion.  
I race you to the street.  
I end in an infamy thrice removed from,  
but like, peace.

The spring in me

RUBAB ABDULLAH SHUKLA

So much luminosity  
So much bubbling laughter in nature  
this spring  
Wherever the air goes nutty and tosses  
up and down  
Whilst the trees doll themselves up in  
new leaves  
Everywhere wild birds are in noisy sing-  
ing, tweeting  
Or baying at dawn and at twilight  
And flowers I witness bouncy in perfum-  
ery natural and free  
Hence it's incredible; isn't it usual for  
me to fume?  
Should you be surprised  
When the fragrance of nature tempts

me?  
Would you cast a silhouette on my love?  
Let us not scorn all our know-how  
I overlook the attention you shower on  
others  
I am thankful to the Spring  
For edifying the choice, of love in me.

Child of None

SANGITA AHMED

Child, you dream of Fairyland  
The unrelenting ground is  
Your mother's bony bosom  
Mantled in blissful oblivion  
You dream  
Of fairies and white horses  
Of clouds to ride  
Of rainbows to slide  
Of golden wings and summery skies  
Of sweet scent of marigold  
Of soft felt of blue  
Of warmth and fullness  
Of joy and celebration  
My child of a thousand dreams  
You will wake in perplexity  
Your limbs aching and numb  
Your guts growling in anger  
Your heart sinking in wonder  
The bosom you lie on  
Is cold as a corpse  
Un-rising un-falling, un-giving, un-  
loving  
The brick you hug for comfort  
Is my placenta  
The pavement, my womb  
Your sweet baby breath  
Your soft dirty cheeks  
Reach out to me silently  
As I look away and walk by  
I see nothing, I hear nothing, I do noth-  
ing  
My child of the streets  
I have failed you  
Back in my warm bed  
The mother in me shuns  
Sweet slumber  
Shrieks in shame  
Dies a thousand deaths