

POETRY

TWO POEMS BY
LORI SIMPSON

Birth of a Nation

They stand among the lost and forgotten
Beneath unforgiving swollen skies
Waiting for splinters of lighting
To awaken the blinded eyes,
The billowing of our breaths
In their deafened ears.
Lingering for the explosion of thunder
Begging to be remembered

That they were not only bodies of pilferage and plunder
Unwilling wombs to intruders and invaders,
More than casualties of war
They were more than mere words
Ranted and scribbled in history books
More than pictures in an album of
Anguished scarlet red faces
Lost to glossy shades of black and white

They were sisters, wives and mothers.
Their flesh, their blood
Spilled red onto an earth of green
They are the forgotten faces
The lost women who helped give birth to a nation.

The Dancer

In days that dawn with a golden haze,
And finish in hues of silvery grays.
She dances beneath the whitest clouds,
Leaping and spinning in breathless bounds.
Emerald tresses blowing with the winds,
Twists and turns, and plié bends.

Rays of light from a glowing sun
Reminds all that the work of art has just begun.
The ballerina dances for all to see
She dances the ballet of the Willow tree.

Port de bras and pirouettes.
Pointed toes on silhouettes.
Dancing in uplifting allegros
Swaying with some sad adagios.
Bursting into frenzied gales
Floating back; as the earth exhales.

She curtsies to those in this earthen hall
Bowing to winter, spring, summer and fall
To all who watched and came to see;
A ballet performed by a Willow tree.

TWO POEMS BY
SHABNAM NADIYA

Him and Her

It was better when she was without
than what he'd given her now
This constant ache in her warmth
pulling towards his. When she goes
around the room shimmying to
the distant heat of song, when
she takes their laughter by the
hair and shakes it silly, when
she pours in rain and lights the
sun from her tongue, her teeth,
her unclenched jaws, is when he
craves her, sucks the well of her
dry. Her summer storms bother
him more than the spring eruptions
of budding leaves. But hey, that's okay:

Green can be frightening. Black always is.

Flying Blind

We saw
Death while we had
breakfast at the Bluebird
this morning

and we were sad
for
the scythe he carried
appeared to be
pointing
in the wrong
direction

(You) die and let die

[To Mr. Ifte Khyrul Amin Abbas and me, who are alive
and to my beloved sister, who is dead]

SHUVO AHSAN

Have you ever had a dream of being dead
and walking along the streets or running errands
being not so alive from the cerebral or, so to say, ratio-
nal point of view?
Whatever that is, the POV is that you are alive
but not in your senses, and that you have your memories

of the period of after life six feet under.
You recount your days beneath the ground
and of your deadness, soon after I have exhumed you.
Then you inhume me and bury me deep with a flicker-
ing hope of my second coming.
However, I come back like those migratory birds
to tell a death-tale.
And then you die,
rise again,
wait;
and then I die;
thus starts the waiting to be in the tale to tell a tale of

THREE POEMS BY
AHSAN AKBAR

Full Stop

Age offers hyper-sensitive feelings
About death and sex
My ambitions mostly erased, tortured:
Everyday I'm compounding, renegotiating
Caressing them horribly
With pragmatic attachments;
It's noir.

Stop crooning for an occult
For miracles and surprise inheritance,
Yet I expect to fully savour the rapture
In the nakedness of eternal sleep,
An exit strategy
Without a succession plan,
Induced with a dash of optimism:
A schooner flight, a rocket launch;
I'll fly.

I'll leave no creative force behind,
No leftover from pain or joy
A raging inhaler for murderous fumes.
A raging bull in a china shop.
Your legacy is not yours
And mine can just be a punctuation:
Full stop.

Suits Me Not

I don't like the idea
of wearing a suit
of wearing a tie
The motley crew
of the business world
of the power world
A homogeneous approach
to work culture,
to corporate mantra.

Suits are unimaginative
Oh the drudgery!
It sums up pure drawl
the sort glossy pages
of a recruitment brochure
will sell you in plethora.

Suits remind me of clerks:
paper-pushing,
pencil-eating,
photocopying,
mail sorting,
ad hoc clerking
and of boring accountants.

I want to quit the suit
grow my hair
go unshaven for days,
weeks on end
or months, liberating
my ruffled nature,
at ease with proto-success,
to write poems in Havana.

A Common Purpose

I set off in lashing rain
to catch a train home
from Surrey,
on the other side of the hill.

As I walked into the town,
focused - head down,
avoiding the puddles,
I could not avoid the pavements:
packed with people.
The rain bounced off their umbrellas,
forming a silver mist.

The clouds gnarled
the sun chose not to come out
yet a few minutes later
everyone began to cheer,
waving their flags;
I swayed, joined in,
as the Olympic torch was carried
down the road, far from Athens
farther from Dhaka.

Through pin-like jabs of cold rain
The sense of common purpose was tangible,
and the readiness for sacrifice
- in the form of a thorough soaking -
just as evident.

Escape

FROM PAGE 7
'Yes my child, yes! How soundly you sleep- I am totally out of breath from calling you, there was agitation in Wajaddi's voice, 'Hurry now, it's getting late. Don't you know that the manager is not easy to handle? Master's appointed caretaker, the lords of the Shaotal and their mistresses don't sleep. The rascals drink all night long and are always present at the field before twilight hits the sky. I am vexed by all of them! Have to be present there in this ungodly hour. Come, hurry, let's go.'

'Coming, coming,' Bashir had no hurries, 'let me smoke up a little first.'
'We're going to be late. Have your tobacco then. I am off.'
'Wait a bit Chacha. Why are you so tense? Just see... this won't take long.'
'The manager's still going to blame me. He is surely going to sack me.'

'So what? Is there any scarcity of work during Poush? All the lords require labourers during this time. Your manager can go to hell,' Bashir had said plucking straw from a heap and forming a small ball of it in between his palms by grinding the strands together, 'I can't head off without smoking first, no matter what anyone says.'
The conversation on tobacco and having a smoke in the severe cold morning enticed Wajaddi to have some as well. Squatting down on one corner of the verandah, he kept saying, 'Have it your way then, since you are not letting it go... let me have a couple of puffs while at it. No, no, don't grind it so hard. You'll crush it.'
The ball made from the straw was then thrust onto a burning fire on a spit of coal to burn it, and once formed into a ball of burning red coal itself, it was placed onto the mouth of the hookah. Wajaddi silently shivering with cold looked on intently as the hookah was being prepared to be smoked. Everyone else around them was waking up to go to work, some to their own fields and others to fields that belonged to others. All had their sickles gleaming in whatever light that fell on them. Bashir put his lips to the hookah and inhaled twice, making it look like he was kissing the object with much care and passion. Then he handed it over, 'Take it.'
Wajaddi, having the hookah in his possession for a couple of minutes, was lost in the smoke billowing from his mouth and nostrils. He spoke up, 'You were right... nothing is right until you smoke before going to the field.'

'I told you so. And there you were, ruining the moment by keeping on badgering me with the manager's lore.'
'When are you going to harvest your paddy?' Wajaddi asked.
'Such a small amount of paddy? How much time can that take? One and half Bighas land... three months whether I chose to cut down the paddy or not, three months either way. It's the start of the season. Let me work for some of the lords first and bring in some money into the house and then I can start harvesting my own. How about you?'
'Mine? Here, take the hookah. What a sense of humor! I have already cut the measly things down and bound them together to look like an unattended diarrhoea patient. It's high and wide enough to hide a small goat in,' Wajaddi burst into laughter in a raspy tone like a hyena with bronchitis, 'Let it be son.'

'I just asked because you had. Nothing more.' 'Up now. We should not be late any more.' They headed out and spotted a group after one amongst the group yelled out, 'Who is it there?'
'Who are you? Is it Bhokta?'
'Yes. Is that Wajaddi Chacha? Who else is with you?'
Bashir replied, 'It's me Bhokta.'
'Oh. Which field today?'
'Jamtala. And you?'
'Bherendagar. Whose field is it?'
'The manager's. Did you harvest your own, Bhokta?'
'It's done. Have to start sowing from the day after tomorrow. Come by and thrash some paddy for me one day.'
'I will, I will. Why won't I?'
Bashir and Wajaddi advanced on with the morning not yet in sight. A thin mist lingered in the atmosphere. The black soil was slightly wet and rock hard. Smoke from the cow-sheeds was mingling with the haze. The village was veiled heavily. They cut through the curtain to emerge onto the field. The wet rice grains strewn across it felt like a spiked whip against the soles of their feet. The chilled wind was blowing the paddy against each other, and the sound of friction was going up and down in changing rhythm.
There was no other sound in the vast open field. The men walking about looked like shadows in the dark. As soon as the fog lifted with the sun's rays tearing through it to fill the vast plane of the field, the sight of so many men working on the field became breathtaking. Only one sound rose out of it all at that moment, a deep harmonic hum that seared through the air and the land filling up every nook and cranny in the field. There is no other name for such music- it is the song of life; the song for living; warm, raging, immortal.
He felt as if he was dying, lying curled up in the ditch. He didn't know how people died, but did believe that the dying ones had no thoughts or could feel neither joy nor sorrow, they could just see their life flash in front of their eyes. He too was unable to think, his mind had frozen over just as his body in the cold, his feelings of joy and sorrow were things of the past, and he had no strength left to feel any pain. He had given up to even defend himself from the cold. With his eyes closed he was helplessly peering into his thoughts to come up with images one after another. Vivid with colours, whether they were of people or the horizon, the sky or the trees, whatever they were-- they were all grazing him by.
He started to become overwhelmed with all the sounds from the beautiful hum of the song of life mingled with the swishing of the sickles, the accidental crumbling of a dry snail or crab under one's feet, the sprint of a field mouse, the songs in everyone's lips filling up the air, chopping off the paddy, binding them together, piling them up in mounds, then carrying them away by bull-carts with creaking wheels, thrashing the paddy amongst quarrels. And many more sounds mixed with his memories from all around filled up his heart. He could clearly see the day progressing into the second stage with the red of the sun turning to the bright white while the hum started to subside slowly into the stillness of the field itself and the many sickles, all started to shine at once in the afternoon sun.
With these fleeting pictures, the last one also

made its way through--pushing and shoving--and remained affixed in his mind. He was covered in goosebumps. He tried to shake it off, throw it into a dark abyss, but the still picture could not be removed.
Nearly everyone had gone home from the field that day. The Shaotal men and women were sitting round a fire while roasting rats and squirrels and carefully skinning them. The farmers and owners were busy taking inventory of the harvest. Bashir and Wajaddi were a bit late in returning that night. They covered their faces and ears and were hurrying back without any word. The ground beneath their feet was ice cold. After staying quiet for long, Bashir spoke up, 'Chacha?'
'Yes? Wajaddi was a bit distracted.
'Have you heard what I am hearing?'
'Why? What did you hear?'
'Haven't you?'
'Will you tell me what the matter is?'
'They say that there will be another revolution.'
'Where?'
'What are you saying? Have you not heard all the men gossiping here and there today? They are chopping down all the Hindus in Pakistan and the Muslims in Kolkata.'
Wajaddi flared up, 'Who told you all this? Who?'
'Everyone is talking about this!'
'Let them! Go home, eat some rice, and go to sleep.'
'But... tonight it's our village that...'
'Look here, Wajaddi cut off, 'don't talk gibberish. This is why they call us uneducated! What will happen tonight in our village? What?'
'The Hindus from Nababpur and Sristidharpur will be coming to our village after performing puja for Maa Kali.'
'Go home,' the irritated Wajaddi stopped midway and then started again, 'why didn't you just slit the throat of the idiot with your sickle who told you so?'
'But, everyone is talking about it.'
'Just keep quiet, will you? I am feeling very cold right now.'
Both fell silent in their walk back, but Bashir piped up once more after a while, 'Chacha, I have a feeling it is about to start once more.'
'How stupidly stubborn can a person be? I am telling you to go home, and here you are still blabbering away.'
Bashir ignored the slander and started to whisper, 'Loyalty lies within one's self. No matter what, Pakistan is still a country of Muslims. The Muslims rule there...'
'Then why didn't you go there?'
'Can we really dare to leave everything behind and just take off with our families like that, O Chacha? But still the country...'
Wajaddi turned around to face Bashir very suddenly. It was as if he was bludgeoning Bashir with his silent stare. Bashir also came to a standstill and stared back stupidly. Wajaddi asked, 'How many fathers do you have? Huh? How many? How many mothers? Just the one, right? Only one country the same way. Understand? Now go!' He walked away in a huff without sparing a second glance backwards.
But they did come after that. They did come from far away villages to slaughter totally unknown people, having left the warmth of their homes, with vermilion smeared across their foreheads. Bashir's family sitting on the cold floor, kept listening to the drums tear through

the mist clogging the field, the gongs resonating in the air to make even the Maagh skies tremble, and the blowing conches to stab at the whole village with ugly claws of a preying eagle as they approached.
The poor attempt of defense was very easily crumbled to the ground with the dust as the bull-carts blocking the road in a haphazard manner were all destroyed. The first sacrifice was of Wajaddi in front of Bashir's eyes. The surrounding straw houses were all set afire. The light from the fires danced on the strange faces with vermilion smeared thickly across their foreheads while raging flames feasted on Wajaddi's stunned, blood-stained face.
'Bachir, Bachir! They are running towards your house...'
'Where? When?'
'There there! They are approaching our house too!'
'Oi Rakib! There they are the bastards...'
Bashir ran with his heart clutched in his hand. The house was burnt down to the ground by then. They were all gone. His eight year old son was speared to the ground. The corpse of a 26 year old girl, resembling a burnt coal black log, lay on the floor of the burning house with the air suffocated with the smell of burning flesh.
'Allah do you really reside in all beings?' Screamed out Bashir, 'Where, where are You, tell me where?'

Having seen this picture, he stood erect instantly as hard as a column of steel. The pulsing veins on his neck stood out. His hands clenched into fists, riddled with throbbing veins-- became as strong as iron rods. He could not see the picture any more, he could not see anything anymore; he went blind with rage and became mad with anger. He walked for miles without end to leave his country, to migrate into the newly founded Pakistan for the last couple of nights. He hid himself in the bushes and jungles during the days, without confronting anyone, or asking for any help, not even from God. He kept telling himself, 'I am not Bachir anymore. Bachir is dead. He does not belong to any country. I will take birth in a new country now!'
The whole day passed in this way, hiding away in a bush and listening to the various sounds of the world around him. All the sounds were mingled away with all the futile thoughts during the day. The northern winds had blown all day long but stopped abruptly with the evening. The fog blanketed the world heavily around him, and he had no idea when everything fell silent. He tried to listen to any kind of sound but failed to hear anything when he eventually noticed the stillness of the world. He only felt that he reached the borders of another country. He was running away even without knowing it. He had to be very careful to have not been sighted by anyone during his escape.
He did not want to be noticed even by any creature. He had heard once that people were not allowed to enter another country, just as they were not allowed to leave their own. He felt as if a torch would shine in his face any moment and his lifeless body would just fall onto the ground.
A very strong draught of cold pierced his body suddenly, cutting into his flesh, drilling into his bones to reach and freeze his bone-marrow, and with all that the core of his brain started to ache with a twisting pang that poked at every corner of it making him lose all his

senses. Yet, he was still advancing, at least it looked as if he was moving on his feet. It was more of a mechanical motion with his numb feet having lost all connections with his brains. He slipped and fell on the hard ground and involuntarily rolled into the ditch. He was sure that he was dying at that moment.
He was dying; everything around him was also dead. The fields, the ponds, the water bodies- all were detached from the living world. The eastern bank of the ditch he lay in was high enough to block any view of the outside world. All those pictures came crashing back once again as the world started to collapse on him, becoming smaller by the moment.
One fourth of a sickly yellow moon over the horizon became visible in that instance. The light of the sickly moon made visible the form of a man who climbed the eastern bank of the ditch having limped across the length of the field from the east. He was wearing a dirty old dhuti that reached up to his knees. He was wrapped in a thick shawl with many trinkets hanging from his shoulders amongst which was a gleaming axe in the moonlight. Bashir, standing very still, looked at the man turning his head. But his head just drooped down instantly. He went back to his pictures; his whole life flashed in a moment before his eyes. He saw his flat country with every little detail, which suddenly changed into warpath. He saw Wajaddi's blood flowing on in crimson, brighter and redder than the fire engulfing everything, and his dead face burning in the fires. He saw his child speared to the ground and the corpse of a 26 year old girl blacker than coal. The ditch came to life with his unholy scream. Bashir came out of the ditch with a squirrel's swiftness to stand in front of the silent man in dhuti. His ears started to ring violently as he heard someone yell out, 'Bachir, Bachir!' He could feel the blood of his son being splashed on his face. The whites of the eyes of dead Wajaddi kept staring at him without expression. With a piercing gaze at the man opposite him, Bashir snatched away his axe and dealt a deadly blow on his head. With an earth-shattering death scream the man's skull crumbled within itself, and he dropped rolling into the ditch.
'You escaped from this country, had you, you Bastard!' His teeth bared out and were shining white like a gorilla's fangs, even in the mild moonlight.
Two torches lit up instantly at that moment, one to fall on Bashir's face and the other on the unfortunate man's axed head. As the light was taken away, Bashir saw his face replaced by Wajaddi's, bloody, disfigured and as stunned. The misty veil seemed to have lifted from his eyes. But as tears gathered in his eyes, both the worlds -- the one he had left behind, and the one he was journeying to -- dimmed out.

Hasan Azeizul Haque, in his illustrious literary career, has written short stories that have given life to an exquisite form of literary language hitherto unknown. Partition occupies a very special place in his fiction, along with other recurring subjects such as the liberation war, women's issues and indescribable sufferings of farmers and working class people. His short story collections include Samudrer Swapna, Shiter Aranya (1964), Atmaja o Ekti Karabi Gaachh (1967), Jeeban Ghase Agun (1973); and his novels include Agunpakhi (2006).

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