

IQBAL AND ATIYA BEGUM

ZAFAR ANJUM

Love is a playful child. She makes our individuality and then quietly whispers in our ears—'Renounce it'

—IQBAL,
Stray Thoughts

Ten years after Iqbal is born in Sialkot in undivided India, a girl named Atiya is born thousands of miles away in Istanbul. Just as Iqbal's father ran a business in Sialkot, Atiya's father Hasan Ali Fyzee (1827-1903) ran a business in that Turkish metropolis.

After a few years, the Fyzee family moves from Turkey to India for better business prospects.

In 1906, one year after Iqbal arrives in Europe, Atiya receives a scholarship to pursue higher studies in England. And that's where these two great souls meet—in London.

The day they meet for the first time is April Fools' Day—1 April, 1907. By that time Iqbal has spent nearly a year and a half in England and Atiya nearly a year.

They meet at a party in Miss Beck's place in London. Miss Beck is the sister of Professor Theodore Beck (1859-1899), who was once the principal of M.A.O. College, Aligarh. A legendary academic, he was appointed to that position at the ripe young age of twenty four.

The occasion for Atiya's meeting with Iqbal is provided by Miss Beck, who is the secretary of the National Indian Association in England, and as such, she attracts Indian students and visitors who gather at her house to meet other Indian students.

The meeting is not incidental. Miss Beck has primed Atiya for Iqbal. She had sent him a special invite to come to the gathering on April 1, asking her 'to meet a very clever man by the name of Muhammad Iqbal, who was specially coming from Cambridge' to see her. The invitation had amused Atiya. She has not even heard of him. At the same time, it does not rouse much curiosity in her because she was used to getting such invitations from various Indians in London. Not wanting to disobey Miss Beck, given her dedication to the welfare of Indian students in London and 'the motherly care' that she bestowed upon them,⁴ she decides to meet Iqbal.

The party is on when she reaches Miss Beck's place. Soon, Iqbal too arrives at the scene. The tall, young mustachioed Punjabi man looks dashing in his suit that evening. His 'deep-set eyes hide his feelings and mood, making him appear confident and invulnerable.'

Miss Beck introduces Iqbal to Atiya. They start talking at the dinner table. Though she finds the surroundings of Miss Beck's place 'prosaic and uninspiring', she finds her conversations with Iqbal exhilarating.

As they carry on their discussion, she realizes the depth of Iqbal's scholarship and the sharpness of his wit. While Iqbal is talking, she studies him like a subject. What she finds out about him impresses her even more: a scholar of Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit; 'a ready wit, and ever alert in taking advantage of one's weak point, and hurling cynical remarks at his audience.'

While she admires Iqbal's scholarship and wit, Iqbal takes to her directness and straightforwardness as a person. The two are barely able to contain their liking for each other.

Atiya is curious to know why he



particularly wanted to see her. When she enquires about this, he says: 'You have become very famous in India and London through your travel diary and for this reason I was anxious to meet you.'⁵

'Wow! Is that right?' Atiya thinks, overjoyed with the compliment that the young scholar had just paid her. However, she is a bit skeptical. Is Iqbal being sarcastic?

'I am not prepared to believe that you took the trouble to come all the way from Cambridge just to pay me this compliment, but apart from this jest, what is the real idea behind this meeting?' she looks into his eyes.

That's blunt, Iqbal thinks, but he does not let go of his composure. Eventually, he tells her the truth, embellished by his poetic sensibility. 'I have come to invite you to Cambridge on behalf of Mr and Mrs Syed Ali Bilgrami as their guest, and my mission is to bring your acceptance without fail,' he says, sounding ambassadorial. 'If you refuse you will bring the stigma of failure on me, which I have never accepted, and if you accept the invitation, you will be honouring the hosts.'

As the conversation rolls on, she gets to know the young poet better. She further observes that Iqbal makes himself agreeable or disagreeable depending on his mood. Give him company and he will be vivacious and witty—'never at a loss for wit or compliment'. But most of the time, Iqbal behaves and speaks like a cynic.

When they talk about Hafiz, Atiya quotes many of his appropriate verses. Iqbal too is an admirer of this great Persian poet. 'When I am in the mood for Hafiz,' he quips, 'his spirit enters my soul, and my personality merges with the poet's and I myself become Hafiz.'

Iqbal is in the mood to have a discussion. He further opens up. 'I admire another great Persian poet, Baba Fughani,' he says. Fughani is not known in India. 'You must read him at all costs,' he exhorts. 'Very few of his books are to be found in India, but they must be read as they reveal a different vision of the truth.'

The conversation rambles on and they lose track of time. It is late in the evening and Atiya has to return to her residence. Before departing, she accepts Iqbal's invitation to visit the Bilgramis in Cambridge. A date is fixed. It is to be the twenty second of April.

A few days pass. An invitation arrives from Iqbal inviting Atiya for supper. Iqbal has chosen a fashionable restaurant in London named Frascatis to host Atiya. He wants her to meet some German scholars with whom he has been working.

At the restaurant, the decor is thoughtful and the dinner arrangement delicate. 'This is so nicely done,' she remarks in appreciation.

'I am two personalities in one,' Iqbal replies, appreciating the praise. 'The outer is practical and businesslike and the inner self is the dreamer, philosopher, and mystic.'

The dinner is delicious but the intellectual discussion that follows with the German philosophers is even more interesting. That is the real treat. As usual the discussion hovers around deeper matters of philosophy that scintillate her mind.

After the dinner date, now it is Atiya's turn to return the courtesy. She arranges a little tea party for Iqbal on April 15.

For the party, she invites some of her scholarly friends. Miss Sylvester and Miss Levy are well-known in London as language and philosophy students. M. Mandel and

Herr Metztrath are famous musicians. They all join the party to make it unforgettable. When Iqbal arrives at her place, it turns into a chirpy party with food, conversation, poetry, and music. 'When Iqbal composed a humorous poem these ladies capped the verses in a similar manner, and the air crackled with intellectual fireworks from start to finish.'

As the evening drags on, a lively Iqbal is on a roll with his amusing verses. Atiya is so fascinated by his lines that she wants to note them down. When she starts scribbling her notes, he stops her. 'These expressions are meant only for this particular occasion, and their mission has ended the moment they are uttered,' he gently reprimands her. She respects Iqbal's wish and stops writing.

Atiya's musician friends play some classical music. The party goes on for three hours and becomes a memorable event for all of them. One week later, on April 21, 1907,⁷ Atiya leaves for Cambridge to keep her promise to visit the Bilgramis. It is to be a day-long trip.

Accompanying her are Iqbal and his friend Shaikh Abdul Qadir. At twelve noon the party reaches the residence of the Bilgramis. Iqbal plays a ceremonious courtier when he introduces Atiya to Syed Ali Bilgrami, who receives her graciously. 'If ever I faced the prospect of courting a failure in life, it was with Miss Fyzee, who, out of sheer consideration for you, saved me by not declining your invitation,' he says. He follows that ceremonious sentence by quoting a

couplet of his own in Persian. As usual, there are other guests at the Bilgramis' parlour that day. They all indulge themselves in conversations that Atiya finds brilliant and learned. Atiya observes that Iqbal has a peculiar habit—sometimes during a conversation, he looks dull and tired, but that is not to be mistaken as a sign of withdrawal. He would rather be watching and waiting for any remark that can be responded to with a quick repartee. Once someone gives him this kind of an opportunity, he pounces on his prey with such a 'lightening rapidity' that it stuns his opponent for a moment.

He is like William Gladstone, Atiya thinks. The British prime minister is well-known for adopting a similar tactic in the House of Parliament.

In the evening Atiya returns to London. For more than a month, they do not meet again. However, an opportunity to meet appears courtesy of Professor Arnold.

(To be concluded in the next issue)
Muhammad Iqbal, one of India's first patriotic poets whom Sarojini Naidu called the 'Poet laureate of Asia', is a controversial figure in the history of the Indian subcontinent.

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Bereavement

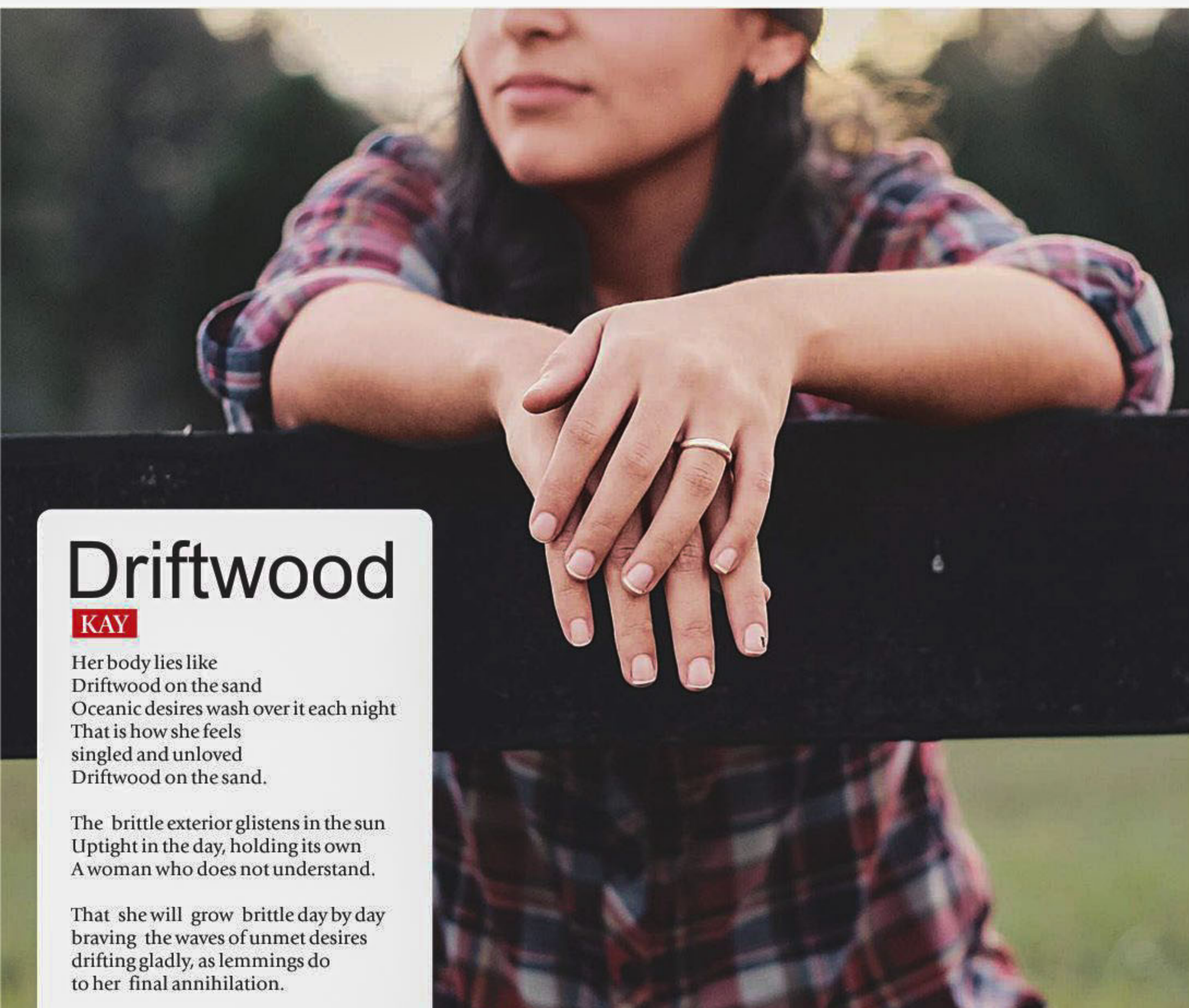
SHAMIM ALAM

Things were not so rosy at first,
But soon they were straightened out.
I was enjoying life with all its gifts,
Until suddenly it confronted me
And took away the best of the gifts.

It was a heart attack that did it all,
That killed my father ahead of time.
I saw my world turn upside down,

I felt my dreams burst like bubbles
And my senses die down.

There was so much I wanted to tell him,
So many places we planned to visit.
I wonder if he will ever know how --
How very much I loved him then
And how very much I love him now.



Driftwood

KAY

Her body lies like
Driftwood on the sand
Oceanic desires wash over it each night
That is how she feels
singled and unloved
Driftwood on the sand.

The brittle exterior glistens in the sun
Upright in the day, holding its own
A woman who does not understand.

That she will grow brittle day by day
braving the waves of unmet desires
drifting gladly, as lemmings do
to her final annihilation.

“ব্যঙ্গ-সৃষ্টিতে অসাধারণ প্রতিভার প্রয়োজন। ... বন্ধু আবুল মনসুরের হাত-সাহায্যে দেখে বিস্মিত হলাম। ভাষার কান মলে রস সৃষ্টির ক্ষমতা আবুল মনসুরের অসাধারণ। এ যেন পাকা গুস্তাদী হাত।”

-কাজী নজরুল ইসলাম



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