

WEST, EAST

AHMEDE HUSSAIN

The white woman and her husband fell into silence again. About a while ago the train was heading east, and now, poised like a serpent that is about to stick out its fang, it suddenly stopped at a bend near a dried fish bazaar.

"Oh, that awful smell!" she said.
 "I grew up with it. It always tells me that I am home," he replied.
 "Not the best honeymoon destination, I presume," her voice was livid.

"Come on! Yeah, right! Honeymoon. You were ok with it before we boarded the train," her husband said.

"I know what you are trying to imply. It has nothing to do with it," she said.

"Perhaps you are now having second thoughts. I bet you now think the contract was a bad idea."

"What happened before we boarded the train shouldn't have happened," she said.

"That was not in the contract, I know. But haven't we moved past that? Is it not the reason why we are here? So that on our way to the resort, you can meet my folks and decide if you want to go beyond the contract?"

"You need me for the Card, right? What has happened before the train shouldn't have happened. You should have used the thing," she said.

There was a jolt, which made the



train move back a little.

"It's my fault; I am sorry," he said.
 "Yeah, that changes everything," she said. They both fell into silence again.

 Since Desdemona fell for Ayatollah and

Caliban tried to rape Miranda, English women have grown this thing for brown men. How else should I look at these two strange bedfellows who stood in front of me in the carriage of the train that instead of moving forward was going back?

They both remained silent most of the time. When the freckle spoke, it was in a whining voice. Oh, blimey! How she hated the smell of dried fish!

And the sodding idiot sitting right beside her, wearing an I'm-HIV-Positive t-shirt, started to romanticise about that

blighted smell. Why was he wearing that t-shirt?

East London type, I guess. Tower Hamlet, in particular. Flown straight from some grungy restaurant in Sylhet. The ones who sliced onion in the kitchen the whole day, and saved money to marry the daughter off to some Brick Lane fool.

But the one in front of me was an exception. He married the freckle. Why, oh why?

It was quite hot outside; the AC never worked when the train waited on its track to let other trains pass. Freckle was sweating profusely. I followed a bead that tickled down her chin and moved like a dying, lonely river into the fold of one of her breasts. So small, so malnourished. I smiled.

The two started to talk, and I was all ears. A riddle it all seemed. Theirs is a contract marriage? Would they part their ways as soon as Ayatollah got the Card? Meanwhile, things happened. Things. I told you, the Brit chicks couldn't resist. Colonial hangover, I presume.

I chuckled. I went back to "The Tempest." The train didn't move, as though it would never move, as though we all waited for something to happen. Some thing.

This story was first published in Bengal Lights.

TWO POEMS

Translated from the Bengali:
 SOFIUL AZAM

First Song before My Second Death

SHAMSUR RAHMAN (1929 – 2006)

Is this the world whose soil gave away for long fruits like buxom boobs and blossoms in springs, being filled up with as well as cleft by her children's labour, wisdom and love? Is this that Old World?

Once on the sea-beach I somewhat saw in the twilight a white horse galumphing friskily like dancer-flames prancing in the air – I remember I had left behind days bright like deerskins, the yearning of fresh trees.

Once he who loved rivers and the blue by heart and built these friendly banks like a skilled artist – never will I find him animated on my eyes nor will the stream be full of life in spring's failed greeting.

The conscience that came back to my life, tearing across the fog of nightmares wildly like blind fortune, never did I want such light whose intent is to adore an inferno in an instant in a covetously thirsty chorus.

Who will put off the fire-pit setting things on fire with clear silvery water? The heart that's gone sunless through many exiles, only sings in utter darkness songs of ghosts – no brighter face to hang out.

Dark dread is spread in blood, no response at all in my locality, even at birds' frightened screeching no wave trembles in the wind, dreadful silence on paths. Stand over there – said someone I do remember,

where in silence a hundred lightless souls in a march pick up insensate bloody yellow pus on to their mouths in a delirious trance hit by terrific nightmares in the dark. With dreadful signs of myriad unforgettable memories

their haggard existence is put on thorns; stand over there, then go straight away, alone, with nothing to care for. Isn't it death as a sense of this scene gets on one's nerves, not death at all, is there anything that death stands for?

It seems I were just that often heard-of Lazarus, stayed three days in a grave, dead – with the loving touch of resurrection have I come back into the sunshine. Yet the dazzle of my dress can't manage to hide at all

wounds on my deformed physique, frankincense easily drowns in the stench of old corpses; at my blue fingertips lies the merciless darkness of those three days. Like an unfinished statue of a sculptor, I stick around

at dazzling festivals in this cheerful city; but yet I can't mingle myself with the lustiness of pleasure, in a weird, awry heaven. Like lethal flowers, many rapt mysteries still flame up in these two eyes of mine.

In my soul I have carried an endlessly bizarre grief. As flowers of dread blossom on the stalks of that grief, none dares come close to me easily, all are afraid lest the sad waters of the Lethe should flow into their veins.

Where in which country have I lost beauty in animals' furry darkness, having carried my life from heaven? Here skulls of the corpses roll in dust everywhere, helpless like pawns in chess, with no future at all.

Sometimes a giant black bird with iron-hard beaks swoops down to tear my flesh – I can't drive it away. And I see the full moon blazing on skulls on this earth like a sad memory, the voice of a second death floats.



The Shame of Return

BY AL MAHMUD (B. 1936 –)

To catch the last train, I've kind of run all the way to the station and glimpsed the signal of blue light on. Suddenly like a frustration, the train is starting off with a loud whistle.

The anxious faces of those I was to go with to the city are watching me from windows, consoling me by waving their hands.

Before coming here, Father rebuked me, Packing things off will take your time away, you'll miss the train.

Mother said, You can stay up late reading books tonight as you often do on many nights. But I fell asleep. In a dreamless sleep I lay like dead on my bed.

But Jahanara never misses the train. Forhad always reaches the station half an hour before. Lailee sends her servant with all her luggage to book a ticket. Nahar never touches rice for her thrill before going somewhere. And I'm their brother, having walked seven miles and missed the late night train, now shivering in the fog at an infamous station.

I'll go back home dangling the white curtain of fog. My trousers will get soaked with dew. On my eyelids drops of dew will gather, and suddenly like a shameless one the red sun will rise. With the sunrays falling on my face, like one defeated, I will see my familiar river in front. Scattered houses, villages. Flocks of cranes flying towards the swamp. Then like a terrific fear, our eight-layered roofed house will come into my view. The tiny grove of plantains.

Long leaves will tremble saying, No, no. Father from the front room, having seen me once, will set his eyes down and recite, *Fabi ayye aalai rabbikuma tukazziban ...* Seeing me, Mother will start off smiling with stale plates in hands. She will say, It's good to see you come back. In your absence this whole house seems empty. Wash your hands and face and come. I'll serve your breakfast. And then I'll rub the shame of my return against Mother in my embrace again and again, and wipe it off.

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

-কাজী নজরুল ইসলাম



আবুল মনসুর আহমদের
শ্রেষ্ঠগল্প

সম্পাদনায়
ড. নুরুল আমিন

Home Delivery Service

www.rokomari.com

16297



আজিজ সুপার মার্কেট, শাহবাগ: প্রথমা (৯৬৬৪৮২৫), পাঠক সমাবেশ (০১৭১৩০৩৪৪৪০)
 কাটাবন: প্রকৃতি (০১৭২৭৩২৮৭২৩), বেইলি রোড: সাগর পাবলিশার্স (৯৩৫৮৯৪৪)
 বিমান বন্দর: বুক ওয়ার্ম (৯১২০৩৮৭)। নরসিংদী: বই পুস্তক (০১৮১৮৫৩৪৮৯৩)
 কুষ্টিয়া: বইমেলা (০১৭১১ ৫৭৫৬০৬)।

চট্টগ্রাম: বাতিঘর (০১৭১৩৩০৪৩৪৪), প্রথমা (০১৭১১৬৪৯৪২২)