



FICTION

# The Goat from the Other Side of the River

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

"Doctor," I chalk on the charcoal board. I ponder for several long seconds until I put two crosses on it with the kind of exertion that could break the chalk into two pieces. The sun is already up. Above the ray-coated roof, I can see an opening. Hays of sunlight penetrate the opening like balmy spears. I keep perspiring; and my forehead is a mountain and my sweat drops is a waterfall.

I pick up the chalk. I write again. This time firmly and tenaciously.

"Teacher," my right hand proceeds. Now I'm sure. I point my chin up firmly. As I slip into my shoes, I am reminded of my almost bare soles. I head out then to the nearby river station. For only 2 taka, they will transport me to the other side of the river. People here are mostly dependent on that station for boats—the only means to go to the other side.

Unfortunately, there's nothing's on this side of the village except shanties. Here, children die due to lack of proper and timely cures; floods come and go, and rehabilitation is tough. Here, plants don't cry out to the sun. Almost all of them are withered. This side of the village is a temple of melancholy, I like to say. Schools, hospitals, markets—they are all on the other side.

On my way to school, I see a man dragging a goat with a jute rope on its neck. He tugs on it. Within seconds, the force with which he tugs it accelerates. As if his hands are a fount of strength; force emanates from his muscles. His veins almost penetrate his skin, ready to explode. The goat screams like a demon whose heart has been incised by an archangel. It has its feet firm on the ground for a few seconds, only to give way soon after. It yields to the man. It surrenders. Maybe the shape of the rope was engraved on its neck. I don't take a closer look though.

I knock the broken door of my classroom. My teacher carefully observes me and then reprimands me, asking me to keep my shirt clean the next time. Little does he know that I had bumped into the dying paint of the dilapidated walls.

"Roll 1!"  
"Present sir"  
"2!"  
"Present!"  
"3!" he continues from his stage as his voice captivates the whole classroom. Even the birds on the porch fly away hearing his resonant voice. We do not cower, however.

"Roll 23....!!"  
Nobody answers.  
"Roll 23.....?!!!"  
Now he gets furious.  
"Ro..."  
He can't finish. Someone knocks on

the door.

"Sir, can I talk to you in private? It's about Asma."

His eyebrows deepen.

"OK give me half an hour," he says.

The bell cries and we all head out to the vendor who provides us midday meals. Our school didn't have a midday program until the number of drop outs beefed up. Ten minutes pass by and we head back to the class again.

Usually, school ends when the sun is cruel. Most of us don't have the energy to walk then. However, I sow the seeds of courage inside me and head out for home without giving the distance a second thought. Under the harsh summer heat, I keep perspiring and walking. At a stretch of 20 minutes, I don't stop. Am I trying to beat the god of sun or the harshness of an infertile land? I sit on a



bench under the mahogany tree on the other side of the hospital. I lie down on my school bag and try to rest for a while. My throat is parched. However, I don't have the money buy a water bottle, but even if I did, there are no shops around where I could do so. Minutes go by. Someone offers me a bottle of cold water. I angle my head upward, and see that it's my class teacher.

"Drink, Shafiq," he says.

I devour almost the whole bottle like a drought affected dessert quenching it's thirst upon the touch of a mob of rain drops.

He laughs at the scene and gently waves my sweaty hair with a white cloth.

"What did he say, sir?"

I ask directly.

"Who?" he raises his left eye brow.

"Today someone came to you to talk about Asma, right?"- I inquire.

"Oh, yes. But..."

He puts his glasses down and rubs

his eyes for some seconds.

"But what, sir?"

"She's getting married," words

instantly slip out of his tongue. He then quickens his pace, and disappears into the distance. I keep sitting there without any shock.

It's appalling to neither me nor the residents of my village that once in a while some of the students disappear. The fact catches our attention strongly only when our class teacher does the roll call. They disappear due to a myriad of reasons. Some of them take drugs, some marry early, some elope and run away from home, etc.

I didn't know Asma. But I used to see her almost every day on the front bench. She had the highest Math score last month. Once when the teacher asked each of us about our aim in life, I

had listened carefully to her answer. She had said that she wanted to be a pilot and drift in the wind. She wanted to be independent.

A month has passed. Now when I think about her, it hurts me so. It's not only Asma. Thousands of girls from many villages all over my country get robbed of their desires, succumbing to taboos and not being able to fulfill their dreams. I am a 15 year old, and I, without any hesitation, can play football across the street, go wherever I want to and hope to become whatever I want to be.

She was 15 too. At an age when she was supposed to play in the valleys and grow wings in her fantasy, she had to think about the burden of a marriage instead of completing her education and finding the key to a better life. Instead of ironing her school uniform, tidying her hair for school, buying pencils for homework and painting her future with shades of velvet, she had to

get ready to wear a red veil over her head, cake her face, adorn her hair with bridal flowers and hide her agony behind a docile face. In the eyes of the law, she was still a child. How could one basically get married and sustain the burdens that come with it at only 15?

Maybe she was that goat from the other side of the river, and her guardians were like that heavy man. She was firm on the ground. But they tugged harder, and her feet couldn't resist. She yielded. Her dreams dissipated into the clouds like the unending screams of the goat from where even birds couldn't catch them.

In my village, the impact of child marriage and other social doctrines are so grave that dreaming of equality may as well be blasphemy. Innumerable girls are deprived of their right to complete their education; misogyny plays quite an active role. A whole new generation suffers from beliefs that promote inequality. Eventually, disparity influences hatred, and getting married early only invites trouble. Additionally, many teenage mothers can't run their households with their grown-up husbands as villages aren't that financially sound. Ultimately, they marry off their daughters by the time they are teenagers owing to the belief as old as time that girls are burdens. The same story is repeated as upcoming generations accept the idea of misogyny And with misogyny, comes the continual repression of women's rights.

It's not right when one's sister has to think more than twice before closing her eyes to dream. It's not right when one's daughter has to constantly stay worried about conceiving at an age when she's still a child. It's not right when wedding proposals are forced upon an adolescent female as if it's more like a law than a proposal. Proposals are supposed to be optional, right?

Do wedding necklaces actually shine throughout a child bride's life or chain her neck? Is a wedding veil more powerful than a school bag? Can a village where child marriage is something happening all the time ever fortify itself with the bricks of education? How can peace co-exist with life-threatening dogmas? If I become a teacher, can I encourage many other teenage females to dream and succeed in becoming one?

I have an ocean of questions. Even the sun would fail to dry them up.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is a grade 11 student of Birshreshtha Noor Mohammad Public College. This story was awarded a bronze medal in The Queen's Commonwealth Essay Competition 2017, organized by The Royal Commonwealth Society. The theme of the competition -- peace.



POETRY

# Prayer and Lament

NAUSHEEN EUSUF

507 dead and 22,407 injured in political violence in Bangladesh in 2013 (This poem was first published in World Literature Today).

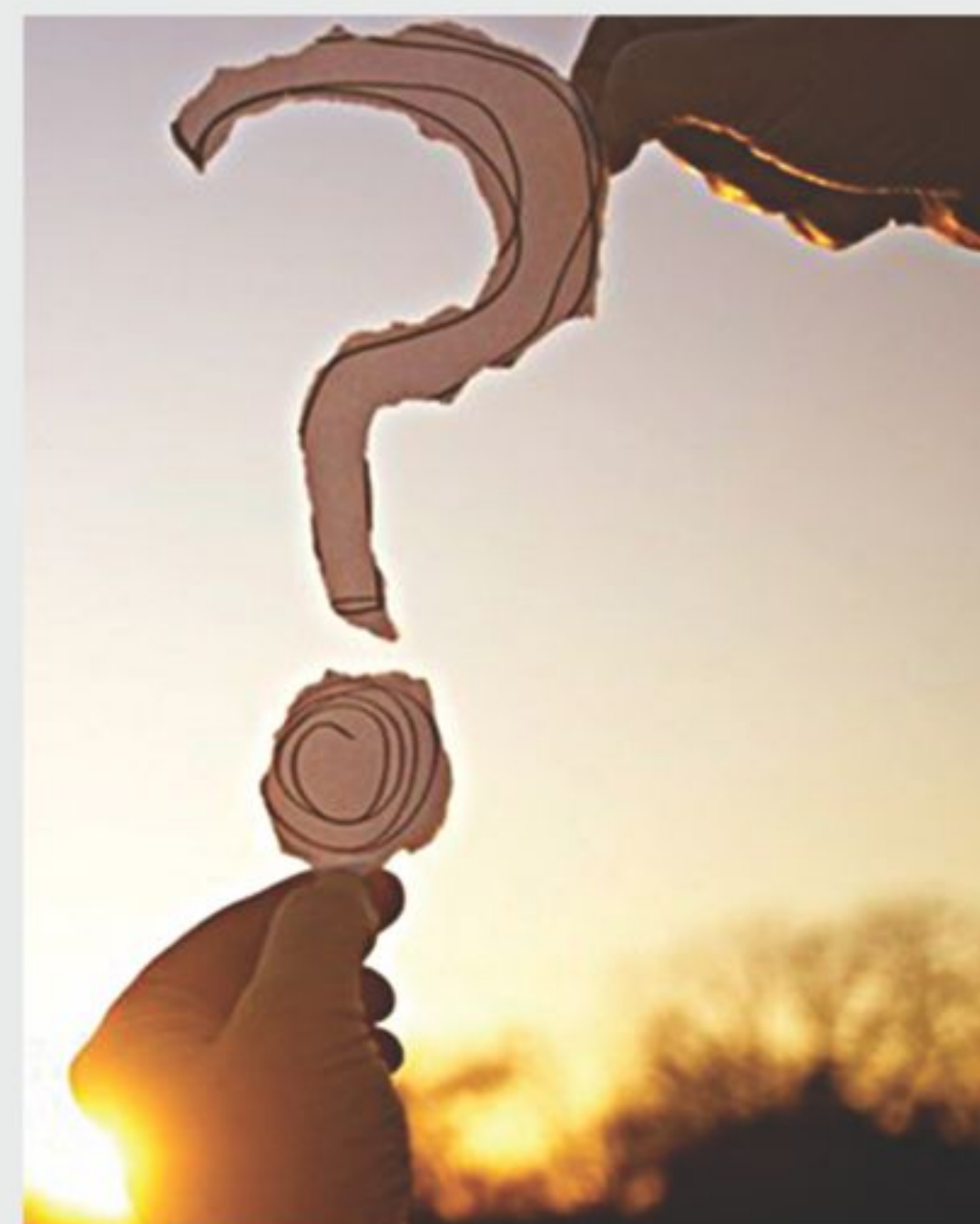
Heal the scorched flesh and crippled forms that crowd the wards, having leapt in flames from a fire-bombed bus, now a charred carcass where the sky seeps through gaping windows. Stay the hand that hurls the bomb.

Mend the homes and hearths vandalized, the buses torched, the stores sacked and gutted. Calm the angry men who mob the streets, enlisted by fiery slogans. Unclench their fists. Return them home where they are missed.

Bless the tailor's apprentice felled one morning by butcher knives that leapt to flay his flesh as cameras rolled and bystanders stood, then fled. Who can blame them who still had lives to save. Accept the sacrifice of his body and blood.

Bury the dead with their dreams and dreads, their pain-limned, shrapnel-tormented limbs. Return them to the grave and grieving earth and grant this nation new life and breath. Deliver us from our unfinished birth.

A birthday tribute to Nausheen Eusuf who is a PhD candidate in English at Boston University. Her first collection of poems has just been published by NYQ Books (US) and Bengal Lights Books (Bangladesh).



# THE ENGLISHING OF 'OMAR KHAYYÁM

JOHN DREW

Ah, Moon of my Delight who know'st no wane,  
The Moon of Heav'n is rising once again:  
How oft hereafter rising shall she look  
Through this same Garden after me – in vain!  
(74).

Nobody knows if Omar Khayyam, the great Persian mathematician and astronomer, ever composed this or any of the thousand or more rubáiyat, poetic quatrains, attributed to him. Perhaps like some of his contemporaries in 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century AH (11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century CE) Persia, he was in the habit of tossing off a pithy epigram at the end of his lectures by way of conclusion.

Scholars now think the overwhelming number of quatrains he is credited with were composed in the courts of India in the 18th century CE, Delhi and Lucknow and Murshidabad and even perhaps in the Carnatic.

**Translation**  
Omar Khayyám would not have registered so prominently, if at all, as a poet, were it not for the translation of some of his rubáiyát done into English by the Victorian poet Edward FitzGerald. FitzGerald fell in love with Persian poetry while reading the Persian Grammar written by Sir William Jones (the 18th century Orientalist who lies buried in the Park Street cemetery in Kolkata).

Jones, typically for him, illustrated seminal points of Persian grammar with examples from the great Persian poets, Háfez and Sa'adi and Ashraf and Jámi. How many grammarians today act on the assumption that, if you want people to learn, love and really understand a language, it is to its poetry they should be pointed?

**The History**  
FitzGerald had as his Persian teacher Edward Cowell, Professor at Presidency College. Both men came up with translated versions of Omar's rubáiyát, and the only time FitzGerald, described as "a silent Vesuvius," gainsaid his teacher was to say it was his own

versions that should be published since he felt for Omar as Cowell did not.

The publisher in question was not interested and so FitzGerald published 75 English versions of old Omar's quatrains privately and anonymously in 1859. As usually happens with poetry, they fell dead from the press.

A couple of years later, Whitley Stokes, a lawyer and translator, together with a friend of his, chanced on copies of this book selling for one penny in a remainders box in (what is now) the Charing Cross Road in London. He bought copies and passed them on to friends.

There is an overlooked Indian connection here. Stokes, a Dubliner unable to find work in London, sailed for Madras shortly afterwards and evidently took a copy of the *Rubáiyát* with him. Once in Madras, Stokes met up with Thomas Evans Bell, a dissident army officer who was Hon. Sec. of the Madras Literary Society, and together they printed (anonymously) a pirate edition of the *Rubáiyát*. It not only reproduced Fitzgerald's translations of Omar's rubáiyát but also 32 by

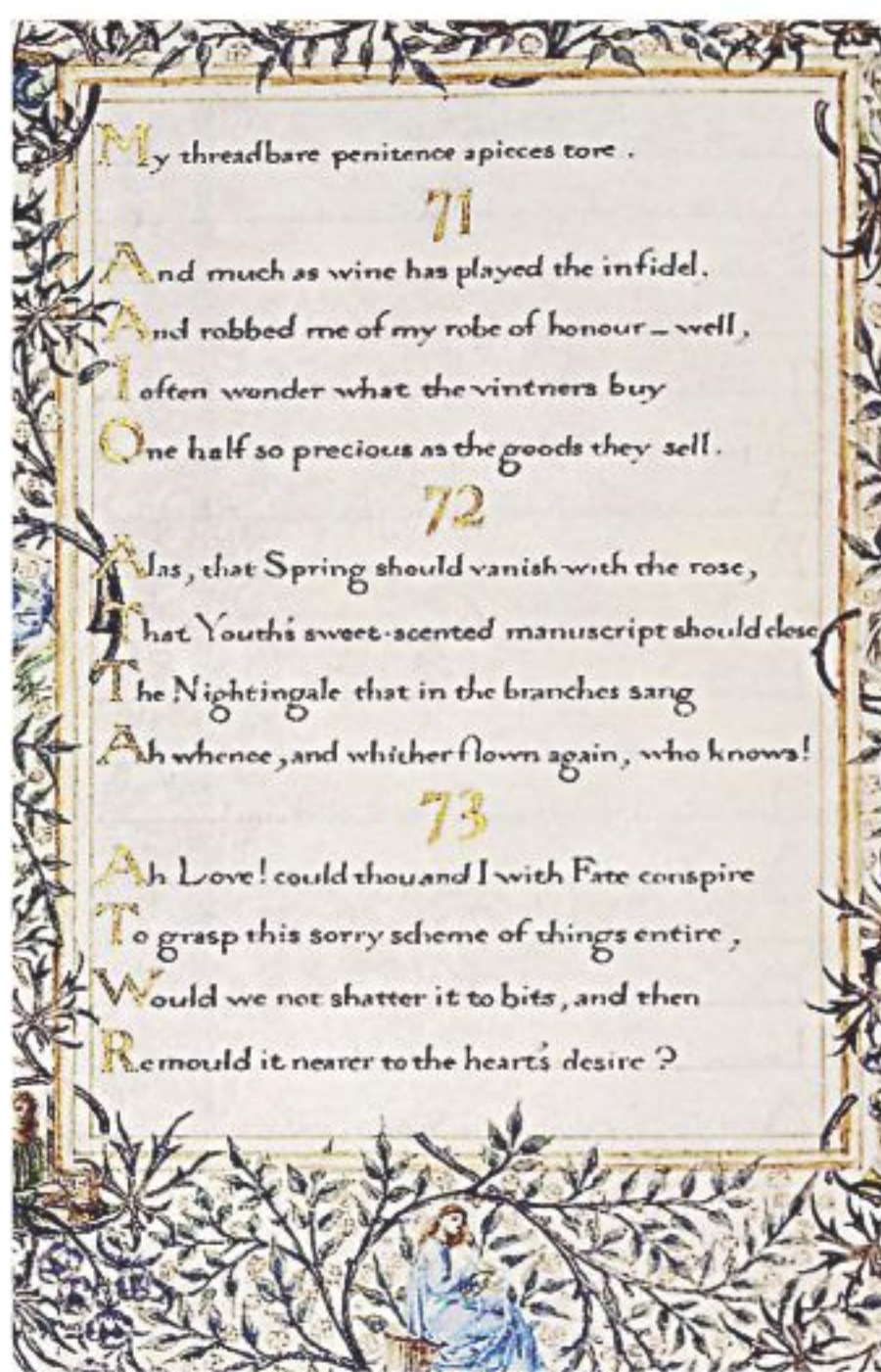


Cowell (published in the *Calcutta Review*, 1858), 10 in French by Garcin de Tassy and 15 versions by Stokes himself.

**Translation of Poetry**

So much for the history. The nature of poetry we may consider by comparing the various ways Cowell and FitzGerald and Stokes translate Omar's rubáiyát.

A four line rubái is actually a complete poem,



though Fitzgerald, in his edition, decided to string his versions into a tessellated mosaic. Even from his mosaic, they may be extracted and read as separate pieces and it is a pleasant exercise for readers to decide which half a dozen discrete poems are their favourites. Here are three versions of the rubái numbered as 72 in FitzGerald's collection:  
Alas that the book of youth is folded,  
And the fresh purple spring become  
December;  
That bird of joy, whose name was youth, -  
Alas I know not, how he came or is gone!  
(Cowell)

Alas, that Spring should vanish with the Rose!  
That Youth's sweet-scented Manuscript  
should close!  
The Nightingale that in the Branches sang,  
Ah, whence, and whither flown again, who  
knows!  
(FitzGerald)

Alas for me! The Book of Youth is read,  
The fresh, glad Spring is now December dead:  
That Bird of joy whose name was Youth is  
flown –  
Ay me, I know not how he came or fled!  
(Stokes)

Cowell wishes to be faithful to the original Persian, FitzGerald to the poetic possibilities of the English language, while Stokes is simply using the form he sees FitzGerald has used to versify Cowell's faithful line-by-line prose version.

Those who argue in favour of a translation faithful to the original set aside the fact that creating a poem that lives is a high risk activity. All poetry is a translation (a Latin root word that, like the Greek root word metaphor, has the meaning of carrying across) in that the poet is trying to find the best words for an experience that resists expression.

No wonder P.Lal in his Poets' Workshop in Kolkata preferred the concept of "transcreation".

**Piracy**  
It probably says something about the nature of poetry itself that the whole story of the rubáiyát ascribed to Omar Khayyám is one of appropriation and piracy. Poetry is a dodgy activity.

We have no idea who composed the so-called "originals," almost certainly many hands, by the time you come to the copy containing 801 and a half quatrains given to Stokes in Madras by his tailor, Saifuddin.

Stokes and Bell pirated FitzGerald's work in their Madras edition without even knowing the name of the author (Stokes at the time supposed it was Cowell) and, by the end of the century, when the poem (after FitzGerald's death) had finally become immensely popular, the publishers had to give up threatening the pirates with prosecution for breach of copyright—so many were they.

**The Persian Sentiment**

Sir William Jones had hoped that a growing familiarity with the beauties of Persian and Indian poetry would revivify the tired and artificial diction and imagery of English poetry. The sufi spirit of Jones's own essays did inspire English poets such as Coleridge and Shelley but it is perhaps only FitzGerald's Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám that bears out the hope he had.

FitzGerald's translation was done in the very months in 1857 when the British were dealing a death-blow to the empire that had brought the Persian poetry into India. The passing away of empire – and indeed all things – is a common sentiment and one that, for example, endeared the work of Sa'adi to the self-educated Evans Bell.

They say the Lion and the Lizard keep  
The Courts where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep:  
And Bahrá'm, that great hunter – the Wild  
Ass  
Stamps o'er his Head, and he lies fast  
asleep. (17).

Ironically, the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám, with its melancholy observations on the inevitable passing of empires and the futility of human ambition, enjoyed its greatest popularity in England several decades later when the British Empire was apparently at the height of its power.

Less surprisingly, copies of cheap editions were found in the pockets of ordinary soldiers slaughtered in their thousands during the First World War.

The Worldly Hope men set their Hearts upon  
Turns Ashes – or it prospers; and anon,  
Like Snow upon the Desert's dusty Face  
Lighting a little Hour or two – is gone.  
(14).

John Drew loves poetry, cricket, and all things literary. He is also an occasional contributor to the Star Literature Page.