



FICTION

The Death of Sorrow

FAYEZA HASANAT

I Azgar Ali was not worried when the war broke out. Theirs was a quaint little village hiding by the slopes near the Garo Hills. It took two days for Dhaka to show its face in their village in any of its form and shape—be it that of newspapers, goods or people. The only train station was twenty kilometers away and the only highway that connected them with the rest of the country was so far that even the bordering country India seemed nearby in comparison. Azgar Ali, therefore, was convinced of the Pakistani Army's ignorance of their existence.

His was an extended family consisted of his three brothers, their wives and their seven children, his own wife, and his three daughters. The brothers lived in separate houses, built in a semi circle around a big courtyard. Standing at the center of the courtyard, the big mango tree worked as a compass for the house. The gated entrance was at its north; the kitchen in the east corner, and the barn was in the west, right by the fodder house. Every morning, Azgar Ali sat with his brothers on the wooden bench under the tree and smoked hookah, and his wife stayed busy assisting her sisters-in-law in the kitchen. It was one such morning—while enjoying his regular hookah—Azgar Ali declared Nalitabari as the safest place on earth. "After all," he said in his usual cheerful voice, "who in their right mind will attack a small village of no importance?"

Azgar Ali's wife however seemed unsure.

"Are you sure it won't reach us?" she asked her husband that night. "Then why does everyone look so scared?"

"The war will come nowhere near us," said Azgar Ali, in a confident voice and went to sleep right away.

But Halima stayed awake. She had this lump of some inexplicable fear growing in her gut since morning. It sat right on her throat, blocking her windpipe and causing her to gasp for breath. Her three daughters were in their late teens and the boys in their household were not old enough to join the war. A simple and honest farmer, her husband would cringe even at the idea of killing a rat. She did not know what got him into talking like a confident protector of the family—as if he had fought countless battles; as if he was the bravest prophet whose words were sure to work like talismans. Halima stepped out to go to the kitchen to get a drink of water. Her kerosene lantern generated a soft flickering light, like a firefly. In its dim light, she saw the stooping silhouette of the big mango tree, blending softly with the rectangular outline of the open kitchen door.

Halima started. She remembered locking the door herself. Halima picked up a sturdy bamboo stick before entering the kitchen.

To her relief, the kitchen looked the way she had left it: clean and organized. As she approached to pour some water from a pitcher, Halima saw a dozen shadows, glued on the floor, like hunched back statues.

"Don't scream," said one of them. "We're freedom fighters, and we need your help. We are being chased by the enemy."

II

Azgar Ali could not believe what he saw: twelve young men, in their early twenties—most of them severely wounded—shivering in cold, not in cowardice. Halima—with the help of her sisters-in-law—nursed the wounded ones, prepared food, and made beds for them in the fodder house by the barn.



"No one will look for you there," she said in a comforting voice, "now eat your meal and get some sleep."

"We won't stay here long," said Nazmul, the leader of the group. "We'll leave as soon as we can."

"You aren't going anywhere," Halima said in a firm voice. "Are they?" She asked her husband.

"Of course, not! They'll stay as long as they need!" Azgar Ali said firmly.

"What if the military comes looking for them? What if our families are in danger?" the younger brothers asked.

"Nothing will happen to any of us. The Army will never come here."

Azgar Ali's house gained a new life after that night. The brothers went quieter than usual and secretly sought help from local doctors for their wounded visitors. Halima looked after her guests, while her sisters-in-law took charge of cooking and cleaning. The children spent most of their time in the

fodder house, listening to the heroic tales of braveries and deaths. And once the stories were done, they ran to their parents to excitedly recreate those battlefields in their own words.

"Baba, did you know Nazmul bhaiya's group is responsible for last week's explosion that destroyed the big bridge?" Lila asked eagerly. "Because they've destroyed the bridge, the army trucks won't come here anymore."

"But didn't they say they were chased down by the enemy?" Azgar Ali asked his daughter.

"Yes, but they smartly dodged them and left behind no trace! They ran for hours, taking turns in carrying the wounded ones, and until they had no strength left."

"They really have no strength left," murmured Azgar Ali. Two of them needed immediate medical care. And he was not sure how long he could keep them hidden. The changing time had

coming."

"How'd they know where to find you?"

"They could have known it by now—had we left them the message at the stationmaster's house—three days ago. It's too late now. Our mission will fail." Nazmul sighed.

"It's never too late. I'll be your messenger!" Azgar Ali declared.

But Halima vehemently objected to his decision.

"I don't have a good feeling about this," she said, "I'm scared."

"You? Scared?" Azgar Ali laughed.

"Don't go," Halima said earnestly.

"Don't worry. I'll be back soon."

Feeling cheerful, Azgar Ali left his house to fulfill his task as a messenger of hope.

III

The journey back was smooth and quiet. Too quiet. The empty roads and paddy fields by the roadside and the lakes and ponds yonder—all stayed quiet, as if dead. Even the homebound birds flew in silence. All the houses stood still in the dark—as if no humans ever lived there. Only Azgar Ali's house had light and sound and voice and crowd. The main gate was destroyed and the house was still burning. Every door of every room was broken. The kitchen was thrashed. The fodder house was demolished. The big mango tree had people hanging in its branches, like withered leaves. Azgar Ali's brothers. Devoured bodies of women and girls were piled up like naked firewood. Azgar Ali's wife and daughters and sister-in-law. Little children lay on the ground like wax dolls. Azgar Ali's nephews.

"Where are my freedom fighters?" Azgar Ali ran from one room to another, screaming, "where are my freedom fighters? Nazmul... where is Nazmul?"

Nazmul was turned into a tree. His body, stuck to the ground with a sharp bamboo pole, stood like a sturdy trunk of a banyan tree. And by his feet, lay eleven other bodies—like a pile of dry leaves fallen from that tree.

"They have killed my freedom fighters! They have killed my freedom fighters!"

Azgar Ali stormed out of the house in utter frenzy. He kept running in the direction of nowhere—to be away from a house that had killed the protectors of its hope, the destroyers of its sorrows.

DEDICATION: Dr. Abdullah Al Mahmud, Bir Protik. My uncle, my freedom fighter.

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turned too many people into foes of freedom.

Azgar Ali's second daughter Mila brought the news of hope. "Baba, you know who they're waiting for?"

"Who?"

"Mahmud, their leader. A medical student and a ferocious freedom fighter," said Mila.

"Under Mahmud's command, they destroyed the Madhupur Bridge," Lila added, "and fought successfully against the enemy soldiers."

"And once Mahmud arrives, they'll attack the enemy camp by the border," said Shila—the youngest of his daughters.

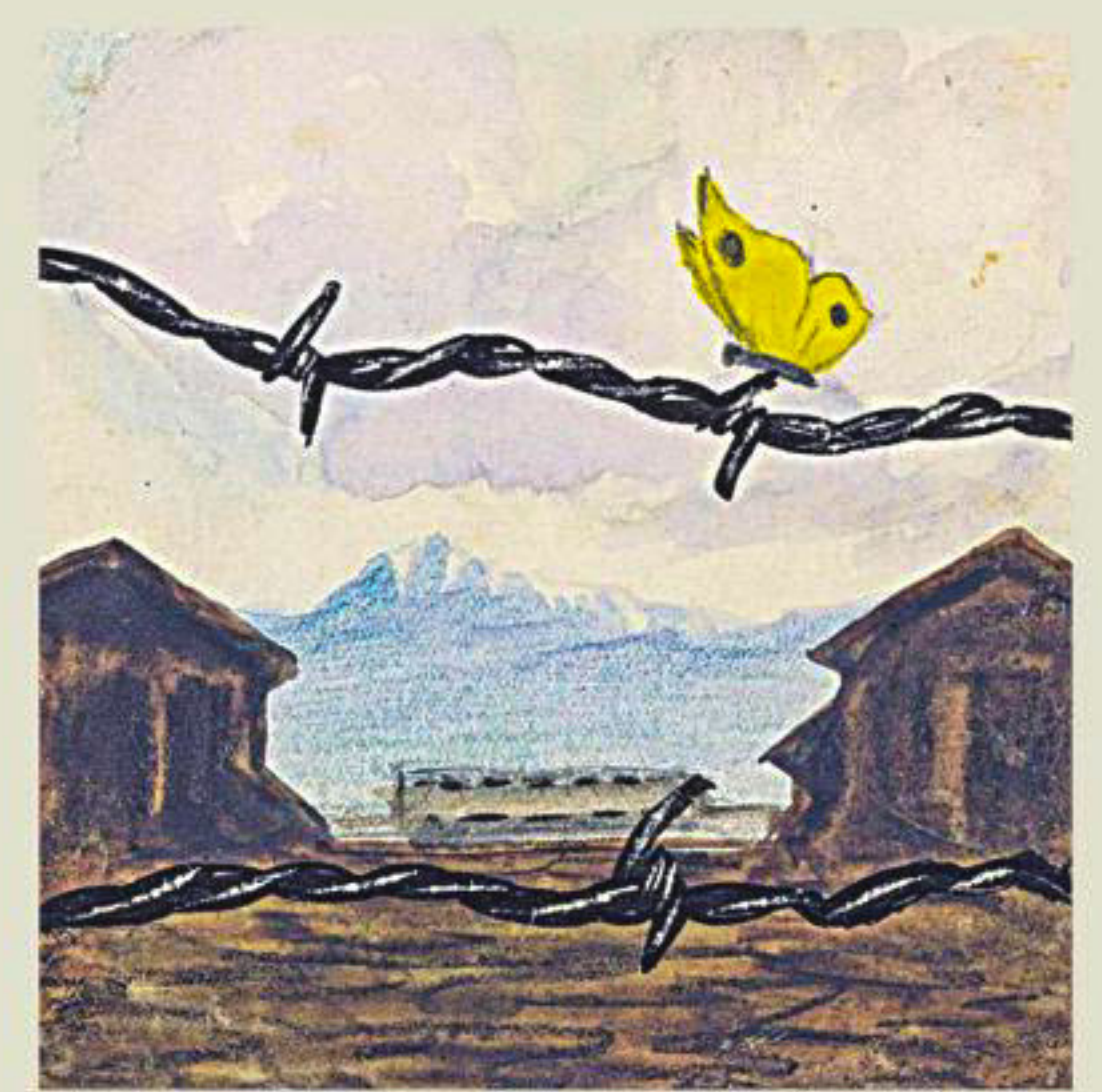
Intrigued by his family's resolute faith in a mysterious man, Azgar Ali went to see Nazmul.

"Why is everyone rejoicing in false hope?" he asked. "Who is coming?"

"Mahmud. Our leader. And Hamid. Wahed. Saleh. And Hashem. They're all



POETRY



MY USELESS WEAPON

A WAR POEM
BY SHAHEED QUADERI

TRANSLATED BY KAISER HAQ

As Bird flocks take wing at the rattle of sten guns
The broken-winged poems crouching in my notebook
Bury their faces in a dark drawer
And lie like dead swans – or is it like
An ancient rusty good-for-nothing pistol
Without a bullet in its chamber? Still,
I can't get over my attachment. The day
Our neighbourhood, swept by searchlights,
Trembled at the drilled terror
Of barking voices and heavy alien boots,
This house too shook in fear
Though I hadn't any hidden weapons
To give me away. But I, nervous, cowardly
Though I am, boldly shielded you from shiny bayonets
And kept you safe from bonfires.

Just as a guerilla fighting for freedom
Straps a sten gun to his thigh
Or warily advances, grenade in hand,
I have evaded prying eyes to keep you concealed
As if you bore the promise of a deadly explosion.

One day, I remember, I dug a hole in the garden
And tenderly laid you down. But when
The heavy boots of foreigners trod all over you
Heedlessly as they came to pound on the door
You didn't explode like a defensive mine.

O my serried words, if you still doze in silence
Like bedraggled crows on my notebook pages
Is it for nothing that I've put up with contumely
In my vaunted lifelong passion for you?

You are nothing but restless insomniac nights,
You've given me neither royal diadem nor commoner's
covenant –
Why do I still abase myself at your feet?

Come, let us shake hands and part company,
Only let me plead one last time:
If you can at least once roar like a field-gun.

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Skull among Bricks – a Grey Frame

SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

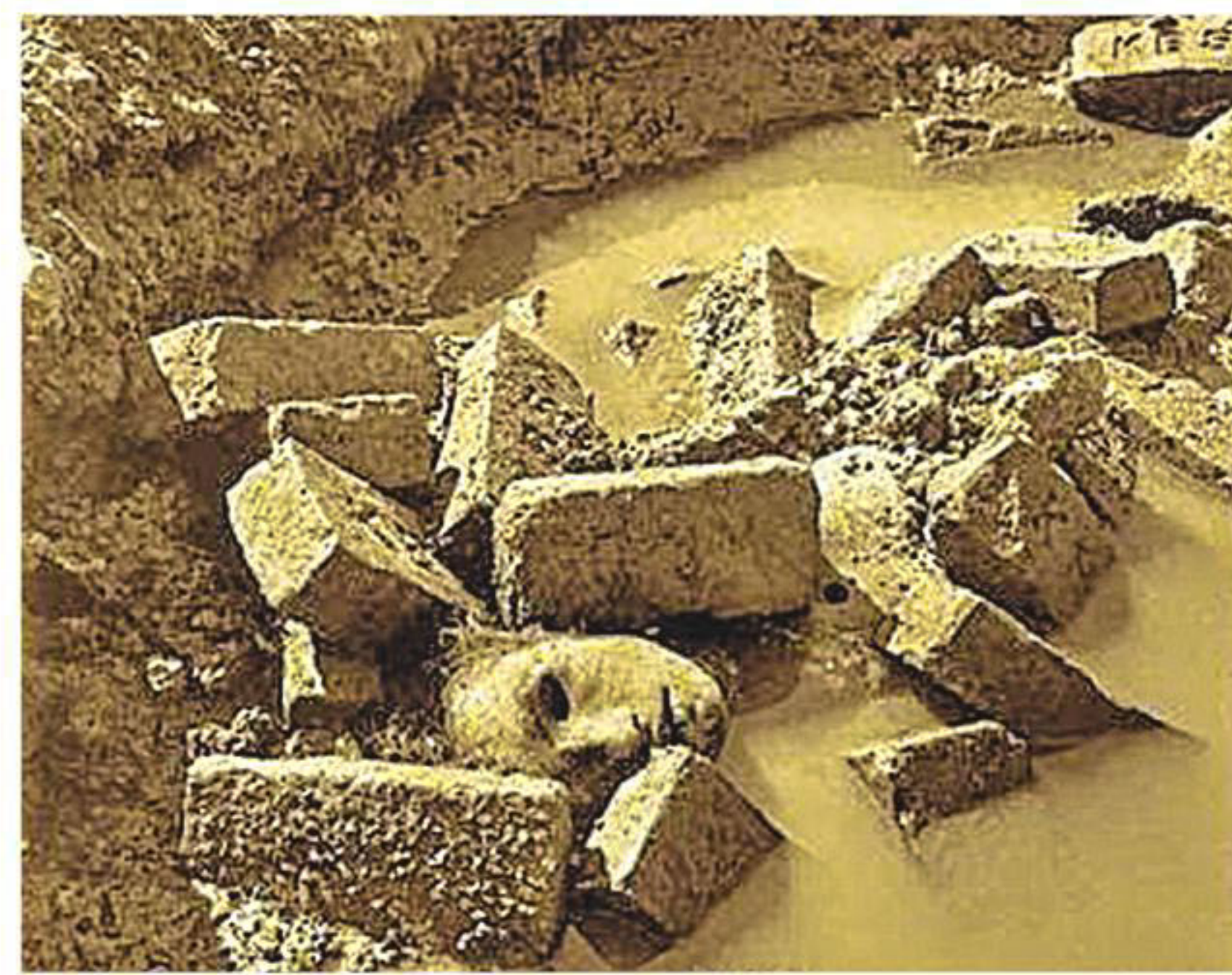
Right now, I am all blue. I was supposed to have my feet on the ground, and study for my upcoming exam—which is in two days. Nonetheless, I am writing. Despite being tired, this is one of those moments when nothing can stop me from writing. It's rare, and I've prayed and prayed that I can taste this often, so I shall try to do it just once.

A week earlier, I came across an old photo in one of Dhaka's history archive pages. The photograph contained a severed head in a brick dominated puddle—with dark pits where eyes had been. It was grey of course, and creepy too; screaming with ghost memories that were spat out by the 71' genocide. The photo held the narrative of one "Bhagirathi," who was apparently a widowed 18 year old woman. Destiny had nailed her cruel fate when she was captured by the Pakistani military in May after the bloody night of 25th March had crept in, changing everything. The night walked silently all over our country. Sneaking into the corners, peering through the windows, it crept in like a living entity that didn't have legs, hence, no footsteps. Quietly, it spread throughout the city like black tar on crystal clear water. The sky was thick with threats and waiting for the clock to strike the ominous hour. There were the olive trucks, the alien-tongued gun men, and the vultures against grey backdrops over skeletons. The threats took the shape of a phantom meteor. It fell, silently, of course, and the country woke up with a start.

As far as Bhagirathi was concerned, like many other women, she was taken to the camp as well—a new dish to feast on, a dish that never ends from the porcelain plate. The soldiers were animals in disguise. She faced the wrath she was destined to. Her destiny watched her suffer from above the camp tents. It hovered over Bhagirathi like a shadow. Omnipresent, it never left her side. Bhagirathi was not the one to tolerate everything, however. She was determined to sabotage the military in retaliation to the suffering she had gone through. Like the soldiers had been animals in disguise, she became a sympathiser in disguise. A shape-shifter, Bhagirathi devised a plan that involved impressing the soldiers showing how much of an aide she was to them. Once given the permission to leave and return to the camp, she helped the freedom fighters in secret. Her beauty and feigned promiscuity had met the appropriate criteria to win the soldiers' trust, for they were merely animals prone to lust. Bhagirathi was then a bird—flying after being freed from the cage, and returning when it was time.

This particular account reminds me of the pigeons that fly over my campus in afternoon while I read on the rooftop. My neighbour sets them free, and they fly back to the cage when the sun leaves the sky; scattering streaks of pink over the blue.

To come back to the story, the roots of trust went deep by now. She conspired with the freedom fighters to



destroy a part of the military. Accordingly, she had invited them to her village, and they had accepted her invitation, too. The plan had been executed. Most of the Pakistani military men had been killed. It called for a vulture feast, as if the bodies had been presented to the breathing cloud of dark feathers. Some, though severely injured, had made it to the camp. She never returned to the camp after the incident. Trust had become a blurry landscape.

In retaliation, the military put a

bounty on her head. They had been spreading the word throughout. "The capturer gets 1000 taka." Of course, the temptation was too hard to resist. It had always been such to the traitors. It still is.

To destiny's joy, Bhagirathi was captured. Destiny made sure of it. Lucky capturer, though. He must have bought a mansion by then. Destiny revealed its plans through the military's lips. She was taken to the city, probably in an olive truck. From a vantage point, her clothes were stripped. Followed by that,

they had her legs tied to the back of the truck. Later, the truck engine revved and the tires rolled. Bhagirathi was dragged through the streets of the city. The truck returned to the same point after a trip. She wasn't completely dead when her legs were tied to two separate trucks. The engines revved yet again, and they sped into opposite distances.

The city was Pirojpur. Apparently, there were two more people, who were killed this way in the heart of the same city.

I am feeling a sense of calm as I am approaching the end of this musing. I believe, we, who are given the ability to write, have this certain responsibility to make a photograph grey and silent vibrant with colours and sounds, breathing life into it through the magic of literary devices. After all, we were given a brushstroke and an empty canvas, waiting to be heavy with worlds. Like that, I also believe the tales of the unheard *Birangonas* are to be painted with equal vividness as the freedom fighters and distributed among the new generation so that they get a glimpse of the women during the Liberation War. As for the title, this very concept of brushstrokes having to do something with literary merit intrigues me—colouring the colourless photos and presenting history in motion through the act.

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