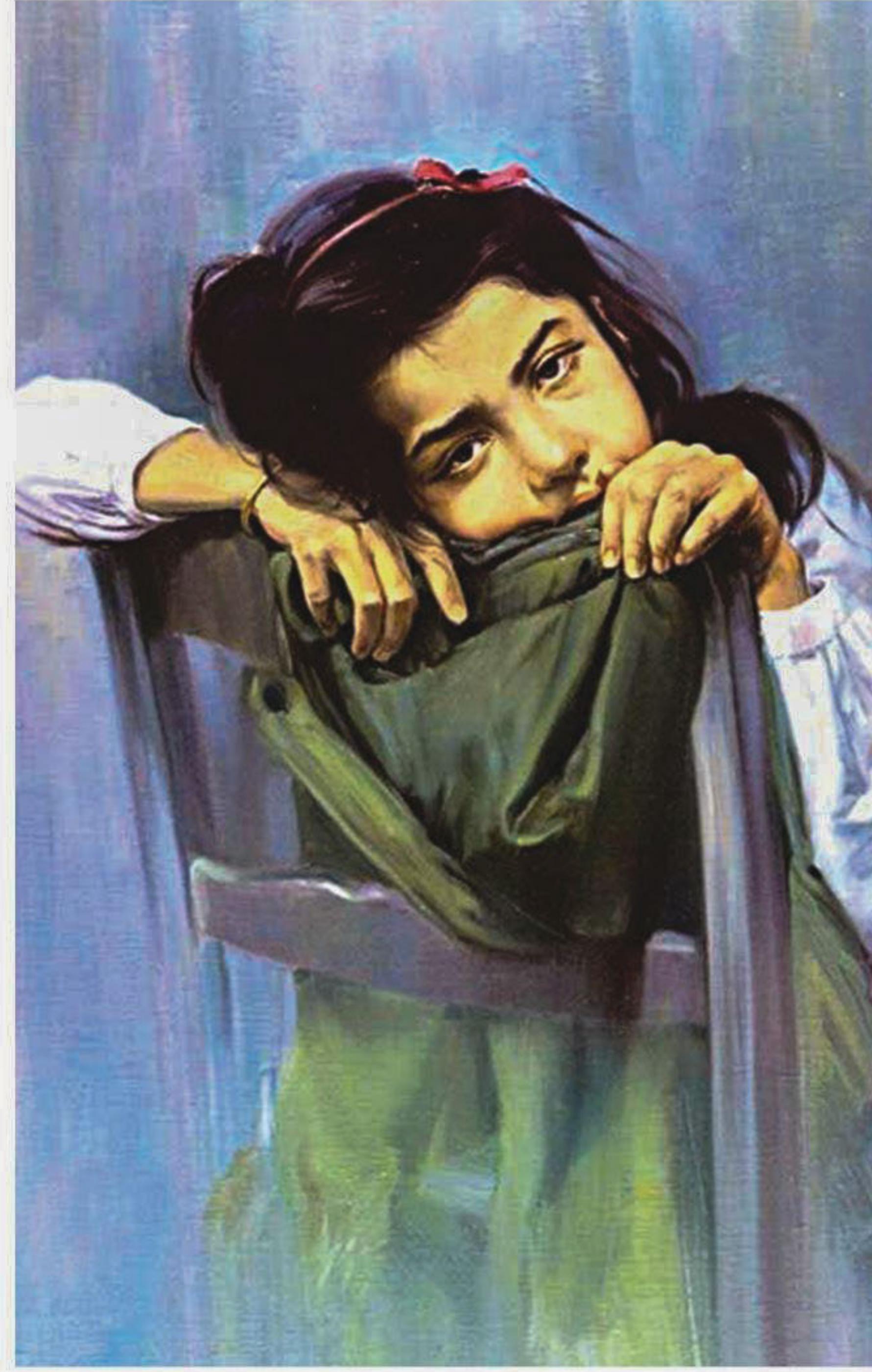


The Monster

SOHANA MANZOOR



Lina slumped into the chair as Chameli left her room. She did not know how to tell her mother that she did not like to visit Reba Auntie's house. Reba Auntie was her mother's best friend and Lina had been visiting her old fashioned house with a delightful orchard since childhood. It had not been such a big problem when Lina was a tiny tot, in fact it was a welcome thought to her child's heart. But lately it had become a source of tremendous discomfort and terror.

Lina's mother had been planning on a whole day retreat since her father was away in Chittagong on a tour. "What a wonderful thing would it be, wouldn't it?" her mother cajoled her. "I know you love that old place. And I'm sure Ruman and Rajon will be happy to see us too." Chameli was making plans and laughing without noticing the shadow of sheer panic in her daughter's eyes. How could she tell that there was a monster in Reba Auntie's house and only Lina could see him. When he was younger, Lina did not mind so much, but now he made her feel extremely uncomfortable. On their last visit, he did something so freakish that she lost all urges to visit their place ever again.

Lina had been chewing on a guava that Reba Auntie had given her and turning the pages of a David Eddings book. She had borrowed the book from Rajon who was her age, intensely relieved that his elder brother was not at home. She sat on the swing that hung right by the front porch and felt no less enchanted than the tiny princess by the magical caves of Ulgoland when suddenly the swing received a vehement push from behind. She yelled and saw that the demon was standing with a wicked twinkle in his eyes. It was obvious that he had just returned home and was pleased to see his object of interest seated in the swing.

Lina cringed and stuttered, "W..what are .. you doing here?"

"I thought you're more interested in spending time with your friend than caring for your daughter," the scathing reply caught Chameli by utter surprise.

"Mother, I... I didn't know that Lina had taken so ill. Why didn't she tell me?"

Hasna Banu looked at her daughter. "Did you ask Lina what was wrong?"

"Bah!" he laughed. "This is my home. I should ask you the question."

"My mom is visiting. And I am here with her."

"Of course. Therefore, you're my guest. I am trying to entertain you."

"I... don't like... your kind of... entertainment."

His eyes burnt with fierce anger and he said, "You'll learn to like it, you—" he used an epithet so vile that Lina cringed again.

Naturally, Lina did not look forward to visiting Reba Auntie. But how to tell her mother that she did not feel like going? Would she understand? For her mother, spending a day at Reba Auntie's house was like spending a day on the ninth cloud. But for Lina, it was just terrifying. She felt close to a panic attack and ran to the bathroom. How could her mother seem so impervious to such threats? She just sailed out of Lina's room humming an old Bengali song.

Lina thought and thought but could

not think of any excuse that would deter her mother from going to Reba Auntie's house. Her glance fell on the table clock sitting on the mantelpiece with the face of a monster on top. Mahim Uncle had brought it from some Eastern European country. The monster was a gargoyle, he had explained. Lina did not care; she found it hideous. Yet she could not just throw it away because it was her favourite uncle who had given it to her. At this point, she thought that the gargoyle looked exactly like the monster at Reba Auntie's house. Lina sighed and got up to get dressed. As she looked at herself in the bathroom mirror her eyes welled up. Her friends said that she was growing pretty. Is that why the monster was causing her all these troubles? But what did he want? Lina felt a cold shiver slithering down her spine.

"Ma, I wanted to tell you something." Lina stood rigid and erect as she addressed her mother.

DIOGENES

The scene must have caught attention of those people who tend to come and go through the Farmgate area. How old may that madman be? He appears to be about 30 or 35. Fully naked, his well-formed figure reminded me of a Greek sculpture when I saw him first. The gentlemen pretend not to see him. I have seen women pass him by lowering their gazes right after stealing a glance at him.

No, the madman isn't violent at all. Sometimes he just screams at the top of his lungs with a roar of laughter, "WHERE ARE THE HUMANS, EH? WHERE ARE THE HUMANS?"

The other day, I watched a *Gamchhawallah* holding out a brand-new red *gamcha* to the fellow and say "Here, take it... now cover up your body with this."

"Ha-ha-ha!" The madman cracked up and yelled "Bastard!!! Are you nuts? Why would I wear clothes? Who's gonna make me feel ashamed? Where are the humans? Where actually are the humans?"

A statue of the Greek philosopher

"What, you're not ready yet?" Chameli whirled around and exclaimed. She had a colourful array of sarees scattered on her bed. Then she noticed Lina's face which was swollen from crying. "What is it?" she exclaimed.

"I don't want to go to Reba Auntie's house," Lina said stonily.

"But why?" Chameli was completely lost.

"I am not feeling well," Lina replied in a wooden voice. "You leave me with Nanu and pick me up when you come back home."

Chameli had made a lot of plans with her old chum and suddenly she lost it, "What's got into you? Do you have to ruin my plans? We've been planning to do this picnic for a long time now and you've to be ill today of all days?"

Lina looked at her mother blankly and turned away before repeating, "I am unwell and I won't go there."

When an exasperated and tired Chameli returned to her mother's place in the evening to pick up her daughter, Lina's grandmother was waiting for her.

Chameli was exhausted from the day's excursion and did not want to talk to her mother. But Hasna Banu told her get in because she had things to tell her.

"I thought you're a mature and caring mother, Molly," came Hasna Banu's somber voice.

Chameli was taken aback. "What are you talking about? Lina isn't that ill. She's just playing one of her..."

She could not finish when Hasna Banu shook her head and said, "Lina has developed a high fever."

"What?" Chameli sprang up. "When? Why didn't you call me?"

"I thought you're more interested in spending time with your friend than caring for your daughter," the scathing reply caught Chameli by utter surprise.

"Mother, I... I didn't know that Lina had taken so ill. Why didn't she tell me?"

Hasna Banu looked at her daughter.

"Did you ask Lina what was wrong? No. You just screamed at her for ruining your day. Did you ask why she does not want to go to your friend's house? Do you really care?" her voice was pointedly accusing.

Chameli looked at her daughter lying on her side in the small cot in her grandmother's room. Lips trembling, she bent over Lina who was shivering under a quilt and was delirious. "Ma...please don't make me go to Reba Auntie's house... Please Ma... Ruman Bhaiya is a monster... Can't I be little Lina again?" Chameli fell on her knees by the cot, tears streaming down her face. "O my darling," she whispered. "I'm so sorry. I'm just so sorry."

Sohana Manzoor is Assistant Professor, Department of English & Humanities, ULAB. She is also the Deputy Editor of the Star Literature & Review Pages of The Daily Star.



A Dead Tongue

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

My tongue is standing by the road
Under a sign that proffers speed limit
Two buses are coming down, racing
Over a line that runs parallel
The driver, is he my age
I wonder
The other, surely he is too
They are coming
Like stuntmen
In action movies
Wood against wood
Sparks of fire
Is there steel too
Ah civilization
Ah development
You see the disparity
One man riding a car with a cat in his bonnet
Hundreds huddle like a kitty in a bag with no bonnet
My father runs one of these machines
How does he do that
How can you risk your life
And put behind a wheel like that
It's as mad as Wright brothers
Getting on a bicycle with wings
Is the bus flying
Is it my father behind the wheels
I will tell him not to ride those things
Things that kill
Who is the thing behind these things
The thing that feels nothing
Yet inflict pain and suffering
Does the bus run on testosterone
Does the bus run on adrenaline
Does the bus run on greed
Does the bus run on need
Why is this bus coming so fast
Is my father in it
Is he coming to get me
In a flash I see my world
That I have lived
My mother promised
She'd cook khichuri
With aubergine
I can smell her sweat
The love and the turmeric
Is there a hint of butter
The fuming khichuri
I didn't have my tiffin today
Had to copy class notes
From a friend
The teacher is so boring
I didn't hear a thing
Tomorrow I will sit in the front row
My dad said if I study hard
And get the results I deserve
He'd put an ad in newspaper
The first in family to go to uni
Why are the buses not slowing down
Can't they see it is the stop
STOP!
My tongue died yesterday!
And the thing lived on!

Shamsad Mortuza is Professor of English (on leave), University of Dhaka. Currently he is the Head of the Department of English and Humanities at ULAB

From the Pens of a Daily Commuter

MOHAMMAD ANWARUL KABIR

(Translated by Subarna Khan)



DIOGENES

The scene must have caught attention of those people who tend to come and go through the Farmgate area. How old may that madman be? He appears to be about 30 or 35. Fully naked, his well-formed figure reminded me of a Greek sculpture when I saw him first. The gentlemen pretend not to see him. I have seen women pass him by lowering their gazes right after stealing a glance at him.

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A statue of the Greek philosopher

Diogenes holding a lantern on his quest for an honest man appeared before my eyes.

TO MAKE A LIVING

I take the bus #6 from TB gate road, Mohakhali to my office at Motijheel. I'm a family man with a kid. And the job doesn't suit me. Taking an overcrowded *Murir Tin* (old, inexpensive bus) to get to office and back home quite eases the commute expense. The bus stands for a while at Mohakhali in order to take more passengers. Meanwhile, the hawkers hop on it and start promoting their products. The products are quite cheap and very attractive to the lower middle class people like us. A lollipop seller gets on it. A packet of twenty lollipops costs only Tk 10. A number of passengers are buying these. So, I also get one. My son always throws himself in my arms when I get home. He'll definitely be over the moon after getting all these lollipops at once.

As soon as the lollipop seller gets down, appears another twenty/twenty two-year-old fellow with a sack hanging from his shoulder. He starts his speech,

"brothers, y'all have sucked enough, now put this on." The whole bus explodes in laughter, and his lecture continues, "Here you can get the Magic Molom (ointment) a dream-cure, a marvelous invention by the Pir Maulana Shariat Ullah Rahmatullah of Dewanganj, Jamalpur." Now that's my hometown, by the way. There's no Pir in Dewanganj, let alone one named Shariat Ullah. When the seller approaches me, I ask him, "Where exactly in Dewanganj did you find this Pir Saheb? I grew up in that place, you know."

The Molom guy gives me a crestfallen look and then whispers, "Hey bro, don't take the bread out of my mouth. I'm a poor guy, working for a living, not that I'm robbing or something. And honestly, the 'Molom' really works wonders for itching."

Mohammad Anwarul Kabir is a poet and micro-story writer, presently teaching Computer Science at AIUB; Subarna Khan is an avid reader and also publishes her poems and short stories and book reviews on G+, Mirakee, Wattpad and many online platforms.