



MUSINGS

# THE DREAM CHASERS

SHAHID ALAM

I was staring intently at the girl sitting in half profile in front and to the right of me. The girl was beautiful all right, but that is not what struck me at first. I was wondering what Heather Tom was doing at that place! Well, actually, she had as much right as anyone present, probably more than them, to be there at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA), London, UK. After all, she was an actress, from the USA, and RADA was catered primarily for would-be actors and actresses from the UK and the rest of the globe. And it was quite possible that many nationalities from around the world had been represented at one time or the other at that august institution.

But Heather Tom? I was soon going to get acquainted with Maggie Gyllenhaal, who was going to gain fame in 2009 as an Academy Award nominee for Best Supporting Actress for her role in *Crazy Heart*, and for many film credits over the years, but in 1996, when at RADA, she was not yet out of her teens, and definitely a neophyte of sorts, in spite of the fact that her parents were both filmmakers. Heather Tom, though, then closing in on 21 years in age, was already a young veteran of the audio-visual medium, a popular subject of the news media in the US, particularly those of the popular kind, and had begun to make a name for herself in the daytime soap opera, *The Young and the Restless*. What was she doing with the Summer programme at RADA, anyway?

To briefly recap my own stint at RADA, I was in the 1996 Summer programme there, learning primarily to act in William Shakespeare's plays from my trainee group's principal instructor, Peter Oyston. There were other groups, but ours was made up of trainees with at least some professional background in acting. In the introductory session of the opening day, all the trainees were gathered in a large hall, squatting down on the (if I remember correctly after all these years) stone floor and listening to the Principal, Nick Barter, telling us pretty much what principals of institutions tend to say to students in an inaugural session. I only knew Brett Bailey, who was a member of the theater group from Boston, USA, and who had also enrolled in the RADA Summer session. In fact, such was the variety of the one hundred or so trainees in terms of their countries and hometowns that hardly anyone knew more than one or two upon their arrival at RADA, if that. Of course, the scenario was to change drastically by the time the term ended.

I will admit that I was taken in by the young woman I had taken for being Heather Tom. The dizzying pace at which the first day went by precluded me from seeing her once the inaugural session was over, but I continued to persist in believing that she was

the rising soap star in person. Maybe she had come to RADA to hone her skills at acting Shakespeare. After all, though popular with certain sections of the population, soap operas are hardly the cup of tea of a sizable segment of the American population. Daytime soaps generally are aired from just after noon to afternoon and go on and on and on for year after year after year. You might find an actor/actress starting off as a young hunk or beautiful leading lady (usually the vast majority of actors and actresses are more noticeable for their great looks than for any great acting ability), age on the show down the years, and end up as a grandfather or grandmother. Not many make a successful transition (not for any lack of trying, though) to the primetime TV dramas or quality Hollywood movies. The soap stories follow a similar pattern of the rich and powerful interacting with each other in their pursuit of



maintaining, or enhancing, their wealth and power. The actors and actresses gain limited fame, steady income, and are also quickly forgotten once they fade out of the limelight.

Back to the inaugural day and the supposed Heather Tom! I saw, from the profile an energetic-looking and lively-acting individual with thick blond hair braided and hanging down to just below the nape of her neck. At one point we had a quick exchange of glances, enough time to reveal blue eyes (hopefully natural) that fleetingly seemed to twinkle. Then back to looking forward and taking in the fag end of Nick Barter's rather lengthy speech. Then she got lost in the chaos of everyone getting up at the end of the ceremony and figuring out the next steps in the process of orientation.

And then we met a couple or so days later, during lunchtime with the food that came with our fees (breakfast and afternoon tea,

too). We just happened to sit at the same table, me with some of my newly-acquainted group mates, she with hers, including my old buddy Brett Bailey. As it happened, she was sitting to the right across me. I found out she was a California girl, born and brought up in Los Angeles, and educated in Dramatic Arts at one of the University of California campuses. She was born to be in the performing arts, I mused in silence. At one point, I blurted out, "You know, you look so much like Heather Tom. You're not her, are you?"

She burst out laughing and said, "No I'm not, but I've briefly met her. By the way, other people have also mistaken me for her."

"You don't say! You're a dead ringer for her."

"You seem to really like her. Are you a soap fan? Do you watch it a lot?"

"No, I don't and I'm not, honestly; but I've seen her pictures and read stories about her in

the papers. She's beautiful."

Then I realized where the two would immediately exhibit their differences if they stood next to each other. From the pictures I had seen of her, I would say the soap star would be a few inches taller than my new acquaintance. I looked closely at her. She was beautiful, warm, bubbly with sparkling eyes, and sensuous ruby-red full lips breaking into vivacious smiles every once in a while, revealing dazzling white teeth, and her entire deportment reflected California sunshine and Los Angeles pizzazz. The lunch was coming to an end all too soon (or so it seemed to me) when her words broke into my thoughts: "My name's also Heather, but it's Heather Ryon."

Man, oh man! This was extraordinary. I had to know her better.

*Shahid Alam is a thespian, and Professor, Media and Communication Department, IUB.*



FICTION

# The Tree of Life

FARUK KADER

Sharif and his wife Ankhi were at the chamber of a reputed Sydney oncologist to discuss the MRI results of Sharif's suspected colon. On the wall hung a board which displayed a large number of his colon's images taken at different angles and perspectives. Sharif tried to get the underlying message emanating from the images. Each image had a few grey or dark spots which looked ominous to him.

The oncologist seated on his side of the consultation table said, "As your physician I am sorry to tell you that you have been diagnosed with stage III colon cancer." He paused for a while and then looked at Sharif, "You have been carrying this disease for the last two years at least."

The oncologist's diagnosis struck Sharif like death sentence from the presiding judge at a court. He felt an icy cold shiver running down his spine and freezing his body. Suddenly, the images on the board became blurred to Sharif. Tears welled up in Ankhi's eyes, as she saw a dark shadow descend on Sharif's face.

The oncologist briefed them about Sharif's treatment in the coming days, "There would be a major operation to remove the cancerous parts of your colon; if successful, and the cancer is not pervasive, then you can expect to live up to five years. Chances are that you may live beyond that. Besides, you will need chemotherapy from time to time."

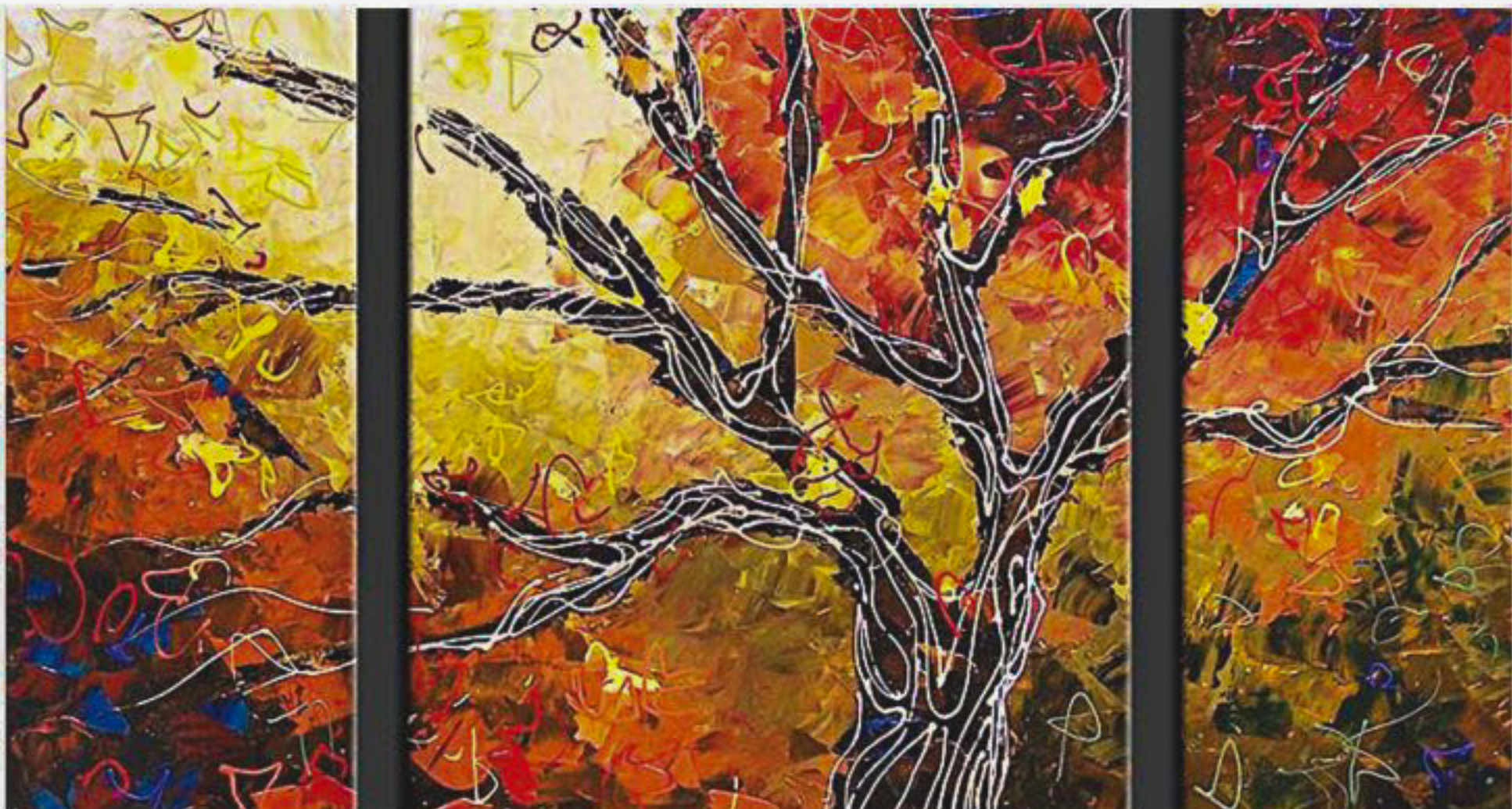
A guilty feeling for his laxness in dealing with this lingering malady overwhelmed Sharif. "Why didn't I care about my health? Why did I keep myself busy with accumulating money, growing assets - house, car, property?" He castigated himself, "Had I heeded to Ankhi's advice in time, I wouldn't have been in this dire situation."

Ankhi was driving on way back home. Sharif remained quiet, while Ankhi felt as if a wild storm was blowing through her mind that seemed to tear her apart. Sharif broke his

silence.

"Ankhi, why did the diagnosis take such a long time? Why didn't GP refer me to an oncologist early?" He sniffled. "Don't you think Ankhi, GP's doses of steroid suppressed early symptoms of cancer?" Sharif became agitated suddenly, "I will sue GP."

"Sharif, please calm down. We will do everything to make you better. Pray to Allah and seek His blessings, please!" Ankhi entreated Sharif. Sharif became quiet again.



But his inner turmoil continued.

*My life has been turned upside down! Everything I achieved seems worthless now.*

*Allah, why are you so cross with me; what I did wrong? Please be kind to me.*

*Allah, please take back everything; heal me, I will do anything you want!*

Then Sharif reflected over the likely responses the news of his sickness would stir up in the community.

"I would be pitied by everyone; my relatives

and friends would come to see me, as if my days are numbered. Many would speculate how my treatment is going to drain out my savings. Oh Allah!" Sharif almost cried out.

Ankhi looked at the GPS monitor of the car to find where they were at that moment. She found that they had veered away from their destination route. The female automated voice from the GPS said, "I am calculating..." The voice seemed to keep Sharif alert for a while. He then sank back to his deep rumination

the end of autumn and the winter about to reign in."

"Yes, I do."

"We sat on a wooden bench under the canopy of a tree shedding dry maroon and faint yellow colored leaves. The sun rays filtered through the dazzling canopy and birds chirping. A gentle cool breeze blew across and we huddled to keep ourselves warm."

"We will come again to this park," we had said.

"But we couldn't make it."

"Would you like to go there now?" Ankhi asked.

"Yes. Isn't it autumn over there?"

It took forty minutes to arrive at Mittagong. When they reached the park, it was mid-day. A gentle shower from a few patches of passing clouds fell down on them, revealing the clear blue sky. The shower rattled many dead leaves off the tree they were after. The different shades of the fallen colored leaves under the tree turned the grass cover into multi-colored mosaics. The sun rays streamed in from the blue sky to glisten the fallen leaves.

The wooden bench under the tree was vacant. It was slightly wet from the shower, but it didn't deter them from sitting on it. They remained seated silently on the bench for a long time, huddled together. As usual, Sharif broke the silence.

"Don't you want to know the name of the tree, Ankhi?"

"Do you know it?"

"No I don't. Let's ask that gentleman seated on the verandah of the house by the side of the park. He might know."

Sharif and Ankhi went to meet the gentleman. After the introduction, Sharif pointed to the tree in the park and said, "You have been watching this tree possibly for a long time. Could you please tell us the name?"

"The tree belongs to the deciduous type, no

doubt. But the deciduous tree has many species. Don't know which species it is. You know, I actually never bothered to learn about that. During late autumn and early winter, my parents really loved sitting on the bench when the whole park came alive under a bright sun amid the dazzling display of shedding leaves by the tree."

"Where are they now?"

"Dad died last year from old age. About three months ago Mom had to be moved to an old home. She has dementia. She hardly remembers anything about what happens in her day to day life, but still can recall many things she was fond of from her past." He paused for a while and exclaimed,

"Oh hang on! Mom was a trained horticulturist. She didn't work for long as one though. She knows the name, I'm pretty sure."

"Could you please see me the next weekend? By this time, I should be able to know the name of the tree from her. Her old home is about twenty-five kilometers' drive from here. I drive there once a week to see her."

"Sure, we will be here!"

"If you could just give me your mobile number! I mean, you don't need to see me separately in that case."

"We would like to come here again." Sharif and Ankhi said in unison, "With our children."

"OK, see you then."

Sharif and Ankhi were driving back to their home in Sydney. It was Sharif once again who broke the silence, "We are going to Mittagong again, Ankhi, aren't we?"

"Yes, we do need to know the name of the tree, after all!" Ankhi nodded in affirmation. "Tanu and Hridoy would love the place."

*Faruk Kader likes to tell stories about isolation, displacement, daily struggle and dilemma, faced by the Bangladeshi diaspora in Australia.*



POETRY



FARNAZ MAHBUB

## Coconut History

The silky skinned beauty went galloping through the prairie

Under open sky, blossomed petals – a settling reality

It was her dream come true, she always wanted to go horse-back riding

The mistress had taught her a few taming tricks – if they stop, you kick - if they slow down, you pull

Off they went, a line preceding – the first time she ever was free

Under the tall pine, a heart spiraled, touched by myriads of bright

So sophisticated, but naïve

## Speaks, The Rain

Sand castles and dream

I even made one half

The washers stopped by

Knowingly pushed down

Soaked – heavy and absorbed

The cracks bled – I watched

Prancing along the field of grass

## Heaven's Hindsight

Long before the glistening pond

Trudged a merry-go-around poverty

The bridge oh so pelt

Through the water-color scenery

Her innocence clamored

Enveloped by the foolish

Shielding her glass lane

A timber sanctuary: so dainty

## War Within

The air is placidly ringing into my ears

The lack of motion tearing ear drums

My senses fall asleep – I walk the oblivion

Yet I sing his songs, I draw his images

Days pass, as do nights

I stare out the window sill

Reach my arm out into the rain

The droplets touch my skin; smoke in

My body is a chimney

*Farnaz Mahbub's passion revolves around traveling and writing. Currently, she resides in Toronto, Canada.*