



## POETRY



## Allegiance

NAUSHEEN EUSUF

The barred windows and fortress walls,  
the wooden benches where applicants waited,  
the bald eagle and the rasping of microphones.

The heat rising off the tarmac, the little men  
with orange flags raised, waving *good luck!*  
*farewell!* The engines throb, the lights dim,

the captain speaking. Acceleration, take-off,  
the plane pointing its nose to the unknown,  
the ground falling away, no turning back.

At immigration, bright lights and long lines,  
burly officers, biceps, badges, tattoos bulging,  
guns glistening from holsters at their hips.

I said I have nothing to declare, no valuables,  
no currency, contraband, nothing. An alien,  
I feared deportation. What if I can't assimilate?

I bent my tongue to new inflections, though not  
without an accent. Every day seemed a mistake.  
I grit my teeth even though my soul rebelled.

I renounced, I abjured, I pledged my troth to you.  
Did I give myself freely? Did I bear true faith?  
I did so not knowing how, so help me God.

*Nausheen Eusuf is a PhD candidate in English at Boston University. Her poetry has appeared in World Literature Today, Best American Poetry 2018, PN Review, and online at The London Magazine and The Guardian.*

From Gitabitan  
"Prohor Shesher  
Aloi Ranga"

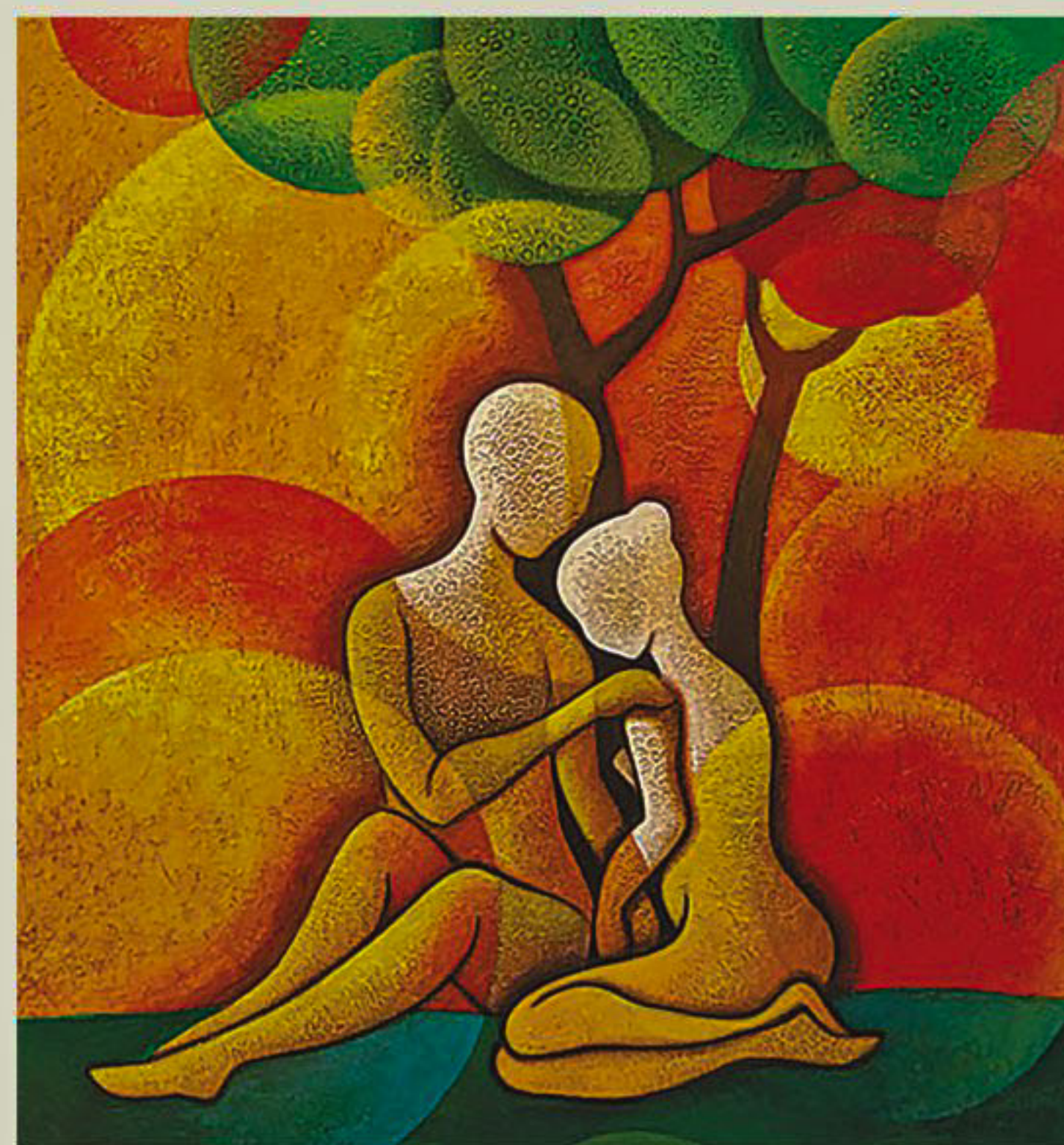
TRANSLATED BY FAKRUL ALAM

The moment I saw your eyes in the crimson glow

Of that dying spring day, I knew I was done for!  
In the everyday rituals of life, in the mart of hearts,  
Everywhere, thousands trade smiles and bars,  
Seeing your eyes amidst them all, I knew I was done for!

Now mango trees in full blossom lilt in the breeze;  
Their buds scatter, filling the air with familiar fragrances.  
In the cluster of blossoms and fluttering bee wings  
Every now and then spring keeps on murmuring—  
Seeing your eyes amidst them all, I know I am done for!

*Fakrul Alam is a Bangladeshi academic, writer and translator. Currently, he is the Pro-VC of East-West University.*

In search  
of words

SRAVANI BISWAS

Who says words are like butterflies?  
I see invisible shackles.  
The clerk behind his tired keyboard  
fumbling and slipping,  
still aspiring, cannot overcome  
the daily repetitions of slavery.

Once a poet had begged the skylark  
To share its purity!  
But purgation is as unknown  
as is love to the woman  
who stands alone by the old cinema,  
her glittery attire playing up  
her cracked and ugly face.

Yet I never give up.  
In raindrops suspended on the arum,  
by chance growing by the clogged drain,  
attempting to hold the sky,  
in the melodies of Gita Dutt  
so handy now, enslaved  
to smart-phones and Time's murky desires,  
I look for the perfect word  
to expurgate. In truth,  
I search for the formless form  
to unlatch your door of silence.

I am still searching for the perfect word  
to open your door of silence.

*Sravani Biswas is Associate Professor of English at the University of Tezpur, Assam.*



## FICTION

## Fall for Love

FAYEZA HASANAT

I  
It was a hard fall. Kheya was astounded—not because she fell, but because of the person she fell for. The man was a magician of words, with a thick beard and a thin voice and was about one hundred and sixteen years older than her, and dead too. So it was not the fall, but the futility of it that troubled her. She could not swallow the sour truth that at thirteen, she fell in love with a dead man.

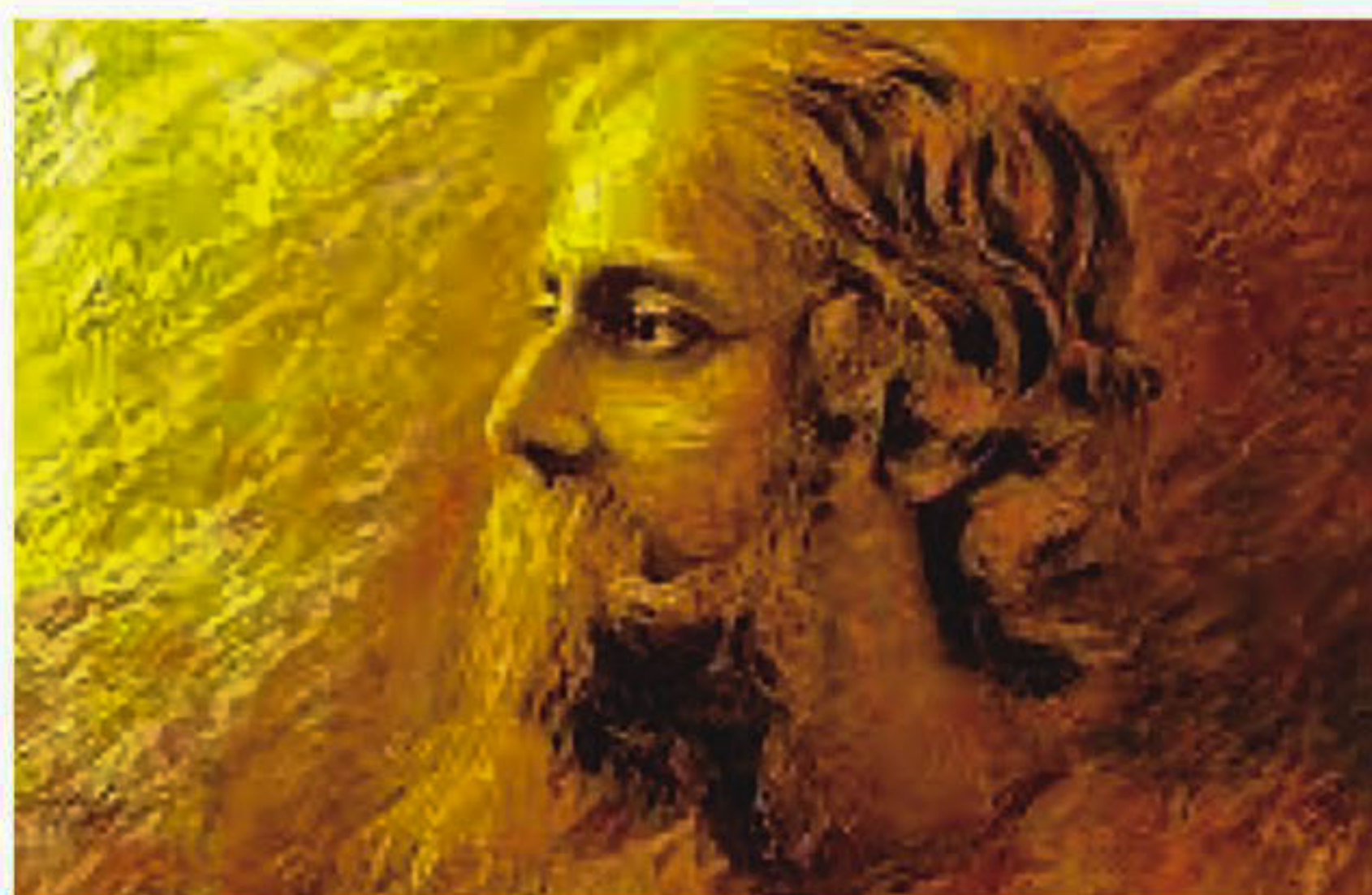
Her first reaction was shock—no, it was her third reaction. The first one was the thought that came to her in the form of a song, and the second reaction was that of an awakening. The song was delivered by a cousin, named Rekha, who sang it in a family gathering last night. It was not that Kheya hadn't heard of that dead man's songs before, but it was the synchronization of cousin Rekha's voice with the melody of the harmonium that caught her attention: one hand bellowing the wind inside the instrument and another hand pressing the wooden reeds to let the wind out, and between the coming and the going of the wind, there emerged a surreal tune to which cousin Rekha surrendered her voice, with her lips quivering in earnest and her eyes gone liquid, suspending a possible waterfall. It could happen any moment—the avalanche of teardrops—Kheya kept thinking. Was cousin Rekha going to cry in front of everyone? Did she miss him that much—her lover, soon to be an ex, as rumors had told Kheya—that she would risk a complete meltdown like this, especially in the presence of uncle Shafiullah, whose codename in the family was Sher-of-Allah? But to Kheya's relief, the song took care of all troubles. Everyone sat captivated by cousin Rekha's rendition and the quandaries of meanings that were both hidden and expressed in the lyrics.

With the light of my eyes, I saw what is outside

But to look within my heart I will need no light.

Kheya closed her eyes. The outer world ceased to exist when her eyes

went dark. She opened her eyes to make sure the world did not vanish when she was not looking. Then she closed her eyes again to have a look within, but all she saw was darkness. "So, that's what ignorance looks like," she thought. She realized she was an ignorant girl indeed. She did not know how a feeble old man could hide



within him so much strength and life! The song went to bed with her that night and woke up with her the next morning and hit her head so hard that she fell, in love, with the undead man.

II

"What do I do, Baba?" Kheya asked her father. "I'm worried about my mental health. I couldn't eat breakfast because my stomach was full with last night's song; I'm sad, and I'm feeling kind of sick. I think I'm going crazy. O my God, Baba! I think I'm going to die because of this man!"

"What man?" Faruq asked as he flipped through the newspaper. It was a bright Saturday morning. He had a cup of hot tea and a bundle of crisp newspapers to devour. But he could not concentrate on his peaceful morning when his daughter's heart was melting away.

"Who is this man? I'll kill him before..."  
"He's already dead!" Kheya interrupted him.  
"What! Wait, what?"  
"But I think I'm in love with him. What should I do?"  
"If he's dead... well, you're too young to mourn over an already dead



man..." Faruq tried to come up with a logical answer but decided to pause to let the hapless girl unwind her sorrow. What he gathered from her long story was that a song fell on her head last night, which in turn made her fall for the writer of the song who died before Faruq himself was born.

"It's not your fault, darling," he tried to pacify. "It's those old men with long beard. Remember Sir Isaac Newton? An apple fell on his head, and he named it gravity? Or Einstein? I'm sure he looked at a moving train with a crooked pair of eyes and thought a train can be at two different times at the same time, well, relatively speaking. And remember Charles Dickens, who called the worst of times the best of times? Or Tolstoy, who said that loving without cause makes one discover the undeniable reasons for loving? Your bearded man is no different. Being one, he belonged to

two nations, and gave them their anthems. Such men are bound to make you fall..."

"Sometimes you just make no sense, Baba!" Kheya was frustrated. "Newton didn't have beard, neither did Einstein."  
"Well, Newton's hair was long enough, I mean, if you think of his head as his chin...and Einstein? I wish he had grown a beard to match with his goofy mustache and the broom-like hair...but you're missing my point here." Faruq tried to keep his face straight as he spoke.

"You're the one who's missing the point, Baba! My heart is broken, don't you see? I wish you were born a hundred years ago. Then I would have met him, and I could have told him about this pain that he's causing me!"  
Faruq held his daughter in a tight embrace, in an attempt to protect her from all future heartbreaks.

III

"Stop spoiling her like this!" Nazma threw her words of caution. "She floats in an ocean of dreams and you're pushing her more into the water. If you keep spoiling her, she'll drown one day, I'm telling you! What if you and I aren't there to save her then?"

Faruq could not argue with his wife because he knew she was right. All his life, Faruq tried to remove all obstacles from his older daughter's path. His other children—three daughters and one son—were perfect in their attitude and aptitude toward life and its intended goal. Only this one was an anomaly. She never followed the flow of the stream, nor did she go against it. She only pondered and waited in every step of the way to be enchanted by life's little things. Because she was always already happy, Faruq had to make sure that her happiness never left her—a task that was quite easy to perform—until a song introduced her to the maladies of love.

"I'm going to give her a big surprise tomorrow," he told his wife. "I'll give her a gift that'll mend her broken spirit."

IV

Kheya was busy finishing up a sketch and did not notice when her father entered her room carrying a harmonium.

"It's so easy to draw his face," she said. "All you have to do is draw an oval shape and a few strokes of long, curvy lines and lo and behold! You get yourself a Tagore."

"Hang the picture on the wall right across from your dresser mirror," Faruq said. "That way it'll show you two poets at once. The Tagore on the wall will reflect the face of Lalon in the mirror."

"The reflection does look like Lalon!" Kheya exclaimed. "But how's that possible?"

"Because all bearded men look equal, even though some are more equal than others."

"Said who?"

"Said Marx, or Engels, or was it Leonardo de Vinci? No. Charles Darwin." Faruq winked. "But it doesn't matter anymore, because now you got this," Faruq pointed at the brand new harmonium, "and a music teacher, who'll be here tomorrow to give you lessons." He then handed her the *Gitabitan*, the complete collection of Tagore's songs. "And this book will give you company all your life."

Unable to contain her excitement, Kheya ran around the room—touching the harmonium with two eager hands, hugging her father the next moment, and then staring smilingly at the portrait of the bearded man and his reflection in the mirror. She held the book close to her heart, then flipped it open, and started reciting random lines from random pages. Her eyes sparkled and her whole face beamed with such an unearthly light that had the old man Tagore been alive and a hundred years younger, he would have fallen in love with this girl, for sure.

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