

Cold Towns

BY ARYAN SHAFAT

Guarded by the Biting Wind, oblivious to its numbing chill, nestled between the buttress roots of the white masked PirPanjal:

A quaint town, dotted with tilted roofs, Srinagar. There, under the wintry halcyon days, the bleak winter sun sparkles upon the town's barren fields, barren houses, barren faces.

Cloaked by the brumal mist of a dim twilight, Daal lake; the perennial teardrop, sculpted from icy darkness, freezes over into an amalgamation of ice and isolation.

Houseboats of American names, adorned with weed, and *shikharas* roam the gelid lake, like insects in dense grass. As the sun descends, behind the enclosing hand, leaving a myriad of colours in its trail, the Jhelum, hidden behind the magnificent, ominous Giants, in white garb, weaves through the feet of PirPanjal.

The apple orchards are devoid of color, the isolated poplar and walnut trees have discarded their leaves; completely naked, basking in divine tranquility, their dark, bony branches: upright, yearning for what once was.

Beyond the crisscrossing, oscillating mountain paths, beyond the dormant hamlets, dotted with matchstick figurines, skeletons of trees, curtailed with frost and popsicles: Picturesque Pahalgam, haphazardly blanketed in velvety white. Streams carrying light, carrying Himalyan pebbles and boulders of time riddle the hill station.



Here, erupted from the ground, the PirPanjal Crown, awake with the cacophony of silence and time-trodden ice. Crowns bejewelled with silky, cascading tracks of frozen droplets, coursing round the shivering, coarse pine trees; partially submerged in white. Each jagged peak, slowly curving and dissolving into each other.

As always, the sun sets on this fleeting paradise. Twilight meanders along to the beat of the

seasons, the sound of hooves gets buried beneath time, colours tussle on top of the desolate and dreary crown.

In the days simmering end, sound goes into hibernation.

The Planet stops rotating; Nothing is Here.

The Great day of Cleansing has arrived. Inside a frozen chasm, the quarantined wonderland,

wisps condense into shards of frost and descend everywhere, pervading the tips of the

cloud clad crown, occupying the most miniscule of crevices, 'liberating' colours from the mind, bewitching souls. Only faint silhouettes of the solitary behemoths are visible as mounds of white form over the soil.

Now, the pebbles are attired in white turbans, the dagger-like pines, sheathed in white, the gardens are terraced in white; there are white lollipops everywhere, the Victorian lamp posts are immersed in a white drizzle, the ruby bridges, slowly sink underneath the scoops of white.

Mystical little flakes halt nature's commotion, Crystalline little flakes descend, pounce and jolt awake slumber.

Bushes take the stage under the guise of clouds with soufflé-like texture.

A white mist of suppressed wishes enwraps the valley.

The perpetual downpour of ephemeral euphoria spreads over the borders near Gulmarg.

Empty mirrors skip along the babbling brooks, reflecting the remnants of happiness.

In the city of Sun and Gloom, the gardens of the Mughals are stripped of blooming buds by the sharp omnipresent Cold. The pupils of life are an abyss, enveloped by snowflakes.

Night has descended. The silhouettes of the mountains are still visible.

The chaiwallah is watching the land.

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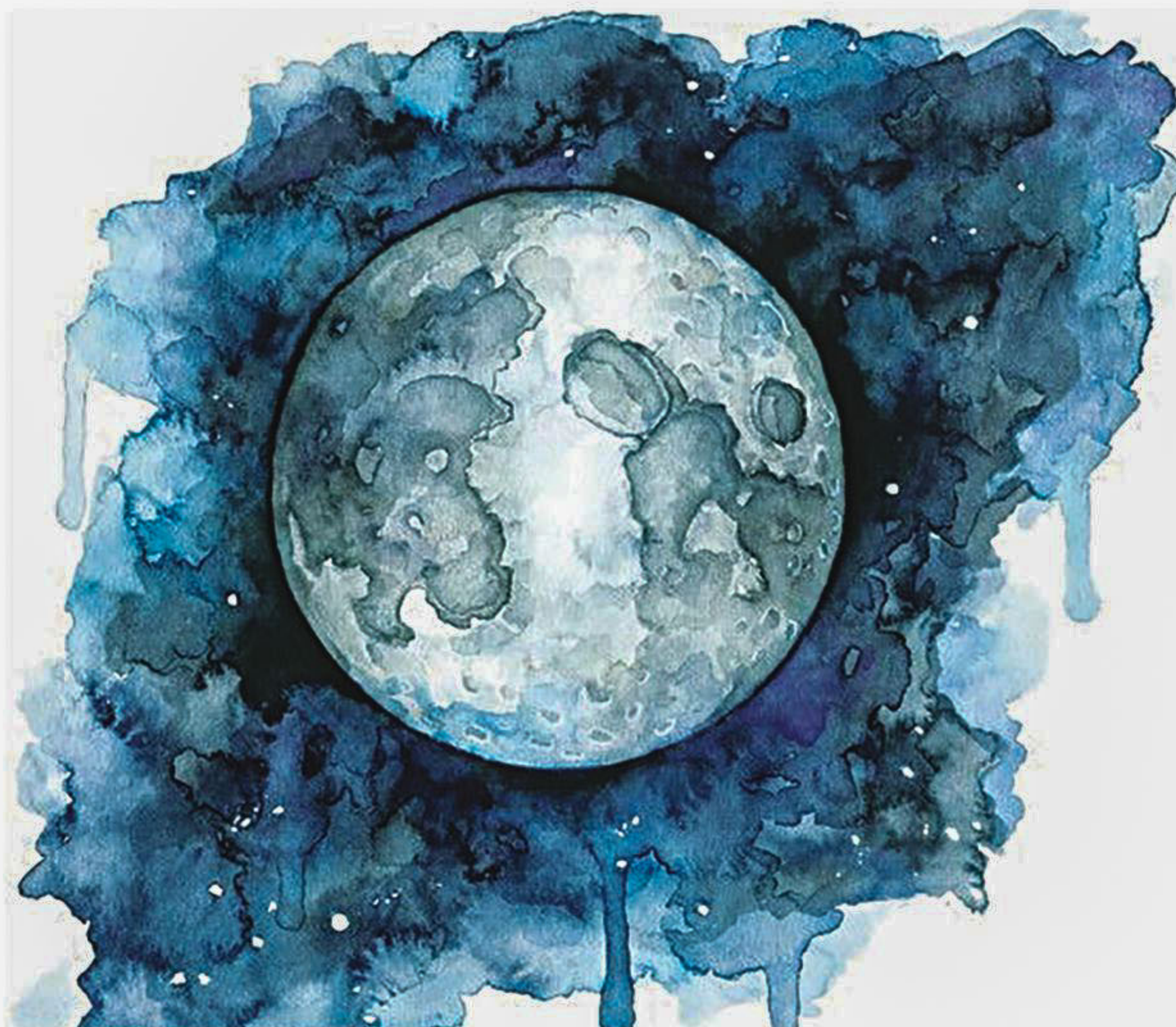
Rashida Sultana's "Moonless" (Part I)

TRANSLATED BY SITARA JABEEN AHMED

I went to a café in the Gion region of Kyoto on invitation of Nizam Ahmed, a Bengali researcher in the University of Kyoto. He had come to my lab in the morning to invite me for lunch. In the café he introduces me to Mahboob Zaman, an artist from Bangladesh. Zaman, a thick frame bespectacled man says he lived in a nearby town, Ibaraki. I told him with a smile about my residence at Arashiyama, not far from there. That was the only time I said anything in that two hours of lunch and chat, simultaneously consuming Japanese cuisine of sushi, sashimi, teriyaki and listening to the discussion of Nizam and Mahboob on Western imperialism, Bush and Blair's petroleum war against Iraq, Sino-Japan relationship, Chinese influence on Japanese literature and many other topics. I just went on playing the role of an attentive listener, with noncommittal nodding, a quality I am gifted with, this listening to hours of perennial balderdash without comment or reaction, even when sometimes the discussion goes against my personal views on the subject. To avoid the atmosphere of discomfort that my silence generates, my friends, both local and foreign, seldom invite me and even when they do, I myself do not accept all of them. Though I stay quiet, I maintain a posture of an attentive listener, with tilted head and alert hearing, sometimes absorbing matters hundred percent against my principles or completely unpalatable for my taste. It is drunkenness that loosens my tongue, I become a different person together, bursting out of my stupor, chill, sleep or drowsiness. Words gurgled out of my mouth, I emit wall-shattering guffaws, call names to people in Bengali and English.

My silence has made artist Mahboob cast mystified glances at me. After lunch the three of us stroll down the streets of Gion and enter beautiful Maruyama Park with its green lawns, flower-laden trees and bushes, creepers and rocks. Wind ruffles our hair. An old couple at a little distance are sitting rapt in close conversation, like a pair of doves. The pink scarf around the lady's neck is fluttering like a flag. Suddenly, in the midst of his tirades against Bangladeshi politicians and bureaucrats, Nizam announces he has to run back to the university immediately for a very important matter. Nizam departs and Mahboob too gets ready for leaving when I speak up, "Today's afternoon is amazing! We can hang around till the evening."

My heart feels like talking to the man. "Let's go sit somewhere," Mahboob says smiling. "In our last two hours' interaction, you were almost mute. Somehow I felt that you're one sunk in a depth of melancholia."



conversation." I say. "My problem is, I don't talk unless I really feel like it. Most of the time I prefer keeping quiet. The academic discussions with my supervisor at the university I do mostly on email. The way I've started talking to you, I've never done with Zaman even and he is my acquaintance in the university. So far, he has invited me twice and on the earlier occasion also I was silent. The moment we entered the park, I decided to talk to you. By talking I mean telling you my love story, the single story I tell those I happen to like. My one and only tale. I don't care for anything outside this—no story, or political, social or historical discourse with anyone. For many years my talking to someone has always meant relating the story of my romance. My discourse is synonymous with my love story. Will you please listen to my tale?"

"I feel honored that you're telling me about your love affair on the first day of our first meeting."

"The crux of the matter is, I simply want to talk to you and you have to listen to this one story of mine even if you don't want to, because I don't like talking about anything else. For the last three weeks I haven't talked to anyone. Before that I was talking to myself, I was intoxicated, in my own room alone.

Sometimes it happens like this – when I get the urge of talking, I get drunk, run around the room from end to end, then sink into a daze and sometimes break down in frenzied laughter or weeping. Then I talk and talk."

"Yes, when you sat in complete silence during our conversation, you did seem like lost in the depth of extreme loneliness and dejection," Mahboob says. "Since we live close by, maybe our friendship will work out fine."

I smile and muse over the fact that maybe we'll never meet again.

"I got into a crazy romance, a roller-coaster ride. It was a Haruki Murakami kind of beautiful April morning, when this hundred percent perfectly eligible male set his eyes on this hundred percent perfect female, just like it happens in storybooks. The man had a birthmark on his right eyebrow and a fantastic style of frowning. A few wrinkles on the forehead, piercing eyes which turn devastatingly enchanting by a smile, everything, including the fingers and nails blew me off at the very first sight.

There was nothing special about Sajeeb's getup. And yet he was exactly the kind of man who used to invade my childhood or adolescence dreams. He was a friend of my friend Faisal.

We were born in the same year, myself in January and he in March. But I loved my husband Irfan and had a happy home. While conversing with Sajeeb, I decided I had to keep my distance from him. No way I would take his phone number and would avoid the gatherings where I might stumble into him. I made a quick exit from the group on the pretext of an important engagement.

After three days Sajeeb's call came, "This is Faisal's friend, Sajeeb. That day you left in such a hurry. Let's meet somewhere for about an hour." That planned one hour stretched to eight. The noon rolled to afternoon, in rickshaw rides from Dhanmondi Café to all the lanes and alleys, the lake side; this is how it all started. And continued for the next five years. Life kept coming to us in variegated forms, in hues of pink, magenta, vermillion, red, all the way. Such ecstasy and yet, believe it or not, even in the twenty first century, this tumultuous affair of ours was platonic.

Sajeeb was a truthful man. He loved his wife. He said he couldn't have a physical relationship with another woman and lie to his wife about it. He had told her about our relationship and she didn't fuss, having faith in the honesty of her husband.

Often we met after office. In our sexless orbit, sometimes we would tremble in each other's embrace, sometimes sobbed holding on to each other.

I never had the courage to tell my husband about this intimacy. Many times we would meet deliberately in common friendly gatherings. The overpowering charge of our eyes was felt by only us, unnoticed in the clamor of many voices. We silently crowned each other by the stardust of our eyes.

That was the beginning of my dwindling interaction with the outside world.

I wished to speak to Sajeeb only, and no one else. Of course, I talked to my husband too, bestowing on him extra loving care out of guilt, even when my heart resisted.

Lines from a newly read poem, color of the grasshopper's wings, fireflies in multicolored croton bushes, suitability of tomato sauce in fried pomfret curry – so many things were the subjects of our discussions. As this affair was going on, my daughter Ahona was born. There used to be a strange look in Sajeeb's eyes as he listened to my excited descriptions of all the shopping and rejoicing Irfan and I were doing during my pregnancy for the expected arrival. Maybe the thrill of parenthood was beyond his comprehension, being inexperienced in this himself. Watching my excitement he would say, "I pray for your child's being as charming and amusing as you."

Right after Ahona's birth, in utter bewilderment I discovered that she had a birthmark over her right eyebrow, just like Sajeeb. After a few days, I noticed she had Sajeeb's dark complexion whereas almost everyone in Irfan's and my family are fair. But there was no way Sajeeb could be her biological father. Every day I started finding new features in her face and body which resembled Sajeeb. He laughed away my wonderment. I took her to him when she was one and a half years old.

"You're feeling this way just because you want to believe she is like me," Sajeeb explained.

Then he took her to his lap, gazed at her face for a while, kissed her birthmark, held her to his chest for some time. Then he smiled and said, "Your daughter is beautiful like a fairy. Why on earth would she resemble ugly me?"

Didn't even realize how four or five years flew by on grasshoppers' wings.

In the thickening afternoon mist of Maruyama Park Mahboob says, "Your life story is unique, very interesting!"

Rashida Sultana is a Bengali fiction writer. She has published several short story collections, a novel and a poetry collection. Sitara Jabeen Ahmed currently lives in the US and has been teaching, translating and interpreting over a long period of time.