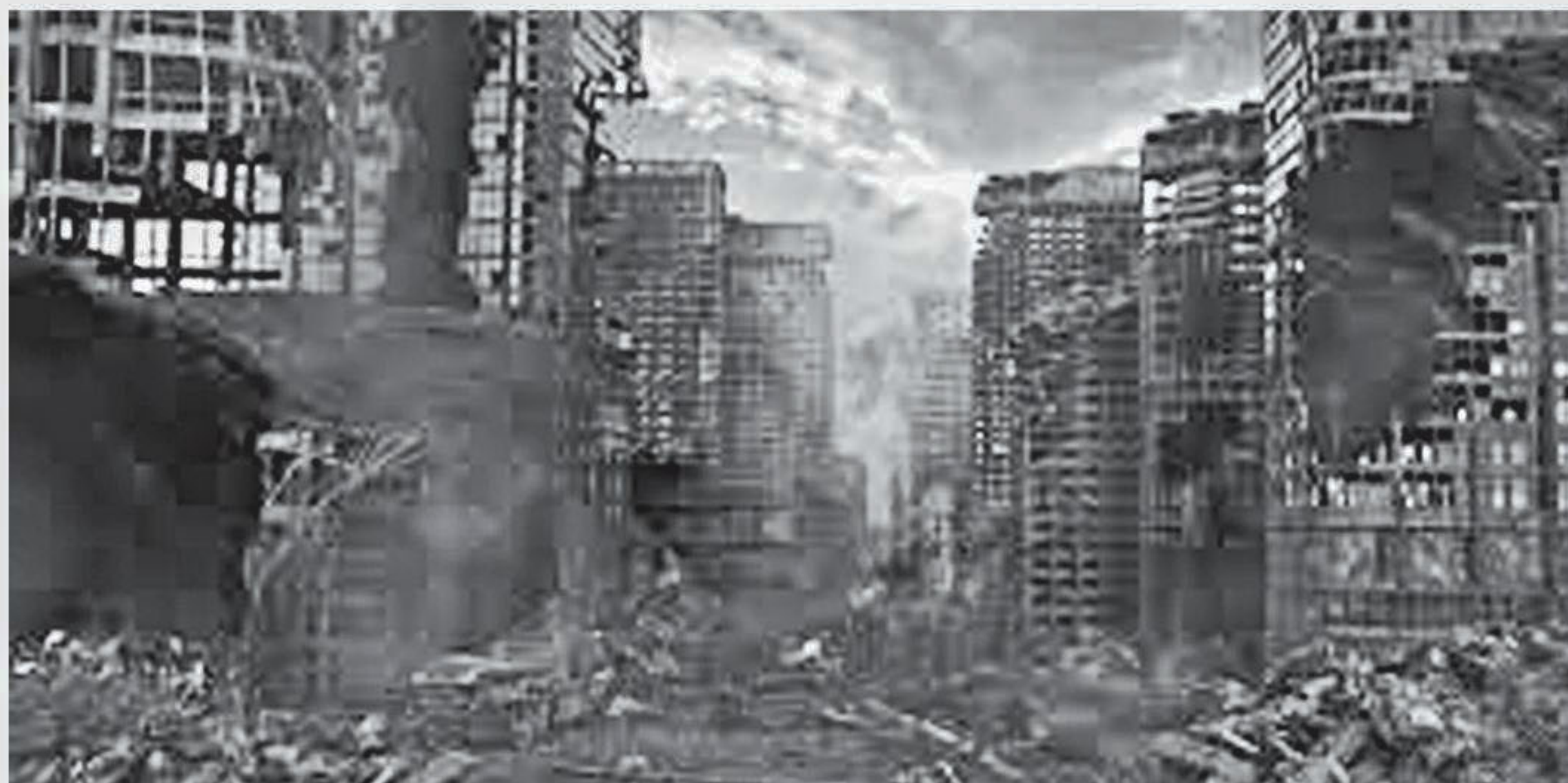



 POETRY

## Where the Bombs Go Off and We Win



SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

We emerged victorious in a burning city of chaos,  
Blood in our hands,  
Bullets in our bodies,  
Burning desire in our eyes;  
Like a fiery tree twirling with its spaghetti branches.  
We had been choked by monstrous hands,  
Our eyes plucked by shiny rifle knives,  
Our tongues stomped by black boots,  
Our legs blown off by landmines,  
Our bones powdered by the cleavers of war.  
*Bang bang*  
Like a deer, hope had faded away—  
As though it had spotted a poacher aiming his gun at it.  
As though it had turned its back on us.  
And the sky fell down on us with all its shades—  
Sapphire, gunmetal, blue, fiery.  
We saw it fall and fall;  
Angels and heavenly birds trying hard to hold it back.  
*Bang bang*  
Our city was a ghost town—  
An unattended and ever-growing graveyard,  
A place thick with souls of the dead

Circling the sky alongside vultures.  
We sent our love and prayer their way as they formed wheels, eyes,  
and boats in the sky.  
Still, like hopeless romantics, we sang songs of revolution,  
wrote poetry of defiance,  
waved flags wet with our blood,  
danced to the rhythm of handmade grenades,  
mocked the hostile air around us,  
flashed our teeth at those who tried snatching our words from us,  
and sent bullets to colonize their bodies.  
*Bang bang*  
In a burning city of chaos, we did emerge victorious.  
As though, from the rotten bones and skulls littering the streets, we  
had been reborn —  
Unexpectedly and defiantly.  
Like a sunflower, raising its head towards the sky from a concrete  
wall.  
Like a piano in a carnival of rubble.  
Like a lone star in a cloudy night sky.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi is an occasional contributor to the Star Literature and  
Reviews Pages.

## The Noble Truth

RONNY NOOR

... let's create a new generation.  
— Hafiz

Leaders big and small set no good  
Examples when they arm the youth  
With sticks and bombs, crying for the  
Wheels of economy to grind to a halt.  
Traders landing at the airport hop  
On the return flight out of town  
While toddlers cry themselves to  
Sleep on the floor for want of food.  
The backpacked schoolboy waits  
For hours in vain for the bus and  
The old grandmother fleeing the city  
In a baby taxi is blown to bits.  
When the fox guards the hen coop  
Hell will break loose for the fowls  
Will croak, and the coop will shake  
From the frenzied fluttering of wings.  
The affairs of the state must not rest  
In the hands of fools and knaves for  
When fools the councils dominate,  
The wise will always keep away,  
Leaving the state in tatters, meritless  
In policy, and the people suffer misery.  
So cast out the old, ring in the new,  
Eschew the evil, embrace the good.  
Open the streets, open the schools,  
Open the minds for the noble truth,  
To light the road to the cherished goal:  
Peace and progress in every household.

Ronny Noor is an English professor at The University of Texas Rio  
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## A Translation of Mojaffar Hossain's "Subservient Country, Independent People"

FAYEZA HASANAT

Majid kept sniffing the air as he walked. He slowed down when he heard someone's footsteps behind him.

"Have you seen the pair of my eyes anywhere?" Majid asked the person. "I don't know where I lost them. It's so hard walking without one's eyes."

The last thing Majid's eyes saw was a rusty knife. He passed out when that knife gouged out his eyes. When he came back to his senses, he did not know whether he was alive or dead. All he could think of was his pigeon coop. He forgot to unlatch it when he left home. Majid wanted to know if the person behind him had seen a pair of eyes loitering around anywhere. He got annoyed by the silence of the listener and asked one last time in an irritated voice: "Just tell me if you've seen them not. I can't wait for your answer all day long, you know? I forgot to set free my pigeons. I've got to return home before it's too late." Majid resumed his walk.

"Ma can't answer you for she's missing her tongue," said a young boy. "But we did see a bunch of eyes scattered on the ground a few miles back. I don't know if yours were there in the mix."

"That must be quite far from here. In that case I won't go back to search for them. Can't waste time by going back. I need to reach home as soon as possible. I'm worried about my pigeons."

Majid walked in long strides. The teenager and his mother also walked fast to keep pace with him. The woman had lost her tongue the previous day. The wound was still sore. Her cheeks and lips were still smudged with lines of dried blood. When she was being raped, she screamed so much that it annoyed the men who were waiting in line for their turn. One of the men cut out her tongue and took care of her irritating screams before he raped her. She lost her voice and stopped resisting after that.

"What are your names? Where are you from?"

"My name is Surat. My mother's name... well, what's the use of asking that now? She won't be able to respond if you call her by her name."

"You seem to be quite a smart boy. What grade are—I mean were you in?"

"Seventh."

"Which village are you from?"

"I can't remember. I lost most of my memories when they drilled my head with bayonets and scooped out part of my brain. I don't remember my father's face, or the names of my siblings. I don't even remember if I had any siblings. I don't recall the way to my village either. That's why we're following you."

"Is there anyone else behind you?" Majid asked.

"Not one, but many. Hundreds of us are walking together toward the village, just the way we ran away from it," Surat said.

"Yeah, we are here alright; only our bodies don't look like what they used to be," someone said from the front.

Majid did not know there was someone ahead of him and was not aware of the man's presence until he spoke. It was so quiet and empty everywhere. Had he not heard the whishing sound of the dusty summer wind, Majid would have thought that he had lost his ears too. The intermittent sound of the wind assured him that he still had his hearing power.

"Who's it that talking? Who are you? From which village?" Majid asked the man walking in front of him.

"I'm your uncle Gafur."

"Uncle Gafur! I couldn't recognize you from your voice!"

"And I couldn't recognize you at all, even though I was looking directly at you," said Gafur.

"Is there anyone else from Nischintapur with us in this crowd?"

"There must be, but it's difficult to identify anyone, you know. The bodies are mutilated beyond recognition. But at least all of them are going back where they came from." Gafur remarked. He went silent for a moment. Then he spoke again. "Going toward obliteration."

"I heard they've set up a military camp in our village," someone said.

"Those who did not flee the village are all killed. All their homes are burnt down to ashes," said another voice.

"Yeah, they died and we fled. But what's the difference? What was the point of our escape? We are coming back any way, aren't we?" Majid said.

"The point is, we have nothing to lose anymore," said a woman. And then she kept saying the same thing over and over again: "We have nothing to lose

anymore. We have nothing to lose any more." Her solo chant gradually turned into a slogan as a few other women joined her and kept chanting with her: "We have nothing to lose anymore, we have nothing to lose anymore."

The women reminded Majid of his sister. And he remembered he had a wife. He remembered the faces of his mother and his daughter. He had a happy family once. And now, all was gone; he was going back home, alone. They might be tagging along in this crowd, Majid thought—his sister and wife and mother and daughter—they might be here with him. They all had fled the village with him that night. Like many others, they were also heading to the refugee shelter at the Tehatti border. Hundreds of



thousands of people packed their lives and fled to safety; some even took their cattle along with them. Majid's plan was to get his family to the refugee camp and then cross the border to join the guerilla training team. He wanted to come back and fight for the country. There were hundreds of young men in that crowd who were going to the border to join the guerillas. But there were moles and informers everywhere. Someone from their close circle betrayed them. It was midnight when they fled. They had thought night's darkness was thick enough to hide them from danger and keep them protected until they reached the border. But the sudden attack dismantled the darkness and the silence of a peaceful night. All they could see

was the flashing fire. All they could hear was the sound of guns and screaming humans. All they could feel was the panic and the fear that a night keeps hidden in its darkness.

"F—traitors! I could have killed all of them had I had the chance to be trained to fight!" Suddenly Majid screamed.

"At least those who were able to cross the border were safe and sound. We decided to flee when we heard that my brother's family had safely crossed the border," said someone.

"O no, that's not true," refuted a woman. "Death attacked there too."

"I gave birth to a stillborn at the shelter; my other two children died of cholera. Now I'm returning home with all three of them," a young woman said.

"Is there anyone else returning from that shelter?" Gafur earnestly asked. He had left his mother, a daughter-in-law, and a grandchild at that shelter a few days ago. Then he returned to the village to fetch the rest of his family members. That night, he had his wife and daughter with him, but he lost them during the attack and did not know where to find them.

"There are hundreds of them with us that are returning from the shelter. Why do you care now? Does it matter anymore?" asked a woman.

"Oh, help! My leg, my leg! I had lost one leg already. This one somehow stayed hanging all the while. But now that it's fallen off, I can't walk anymore. Can someone please carry me?" a young boy started crying.

"Everyone is carrying something or someone on their back. Come, let's see if I can carry you on my fragile shoulders," an old man responded.

"I don't remember if I unlocked the pigeon coop or not. I hope they've burnt my house, and the pigeon coop too. At least it'd save the pigeons from starving to death." Majid sighed.

"Why do you make such a fuss about animals and birds when human lives have no value?" someone rebuked Majid. "My wife set all our cattle free before we fled the village. But she forgot to unlatch the chicken coop and kept badgering about it throughout the journey. God knows if she's still worried about those hens."

Suddenly, Gafur became excited. He saw his younger brother, hiding behind a bush with a few other young fighters.

"Hey, Vyada! What's the update? How's the village?" Gafur asked loudly.

Vyada was with a group of young men and women—the freedom fighters—who were either resting or waiting for the night to get darker. Gafur kept shouting, but Vyada did not respond to his calls. Seeing his younger brother's face, Gafur felt a sudden pang in his chest. He looked down at the direction of his severely wounded and dismembered chest. A pack of hungry dogs had snatched off the remainder of his mutilated gut and devoured on it a few hours ago. There was nothing left inside his chest anymore.

"The wolves and jackals are having their feast, but they are coming now! Look!" Gafur pointed at Vyada and the group of freedom fighters, "Look, they are here! Everything will be ours soon!"

They finally reached their village. People continue coming back home. Some were already home; some never left. Some were burnt to death; some were mutilated with bayonets. They had fled the village when the war broke. The war was still going on when they returned home. But they were not afraid anymore. They had no fear because they had nothing to lose anymore.

Fayeza Hasanat is an academic, translator, and author. She is the translator of Nawab Faizunnesa's Rup Jalal and Neelima Ibrahim's Ami Birangana Bolchi (A War Heroine, I Speak).