

POETRY

# The Door

AEMAN T RASUL

She knocks on the door,  
The door-bell is broken; a  
sculpture of unknown figure  
hangs on the wall,  
The door is solid, but not  
made of Mahogany wood.

An uninviting dusty doormat  
with crushed leaves at the  
entrance,

She notices next door  
neighbor opens the door when  
the postman delivers mail.

The door is filled with spider-  
webs,  
The ants are creeping on the  
wall,  
A cat mews somewhere,  
probably looking for food,  
Butterflies flutter around the  
unattended flower pots,  
A shadow or the light moves  
under the door, she is certain.

She knocks again,  
The sound of foot-steps is  
coming from inside the house,  
Window shutter opens and  
closes, no face is visible;  
The children are playing at  
the backyard and elders are  
jogging,  
Fear of pandemic, unwanted  
guest is not welcome.  
No one opens the Door.

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# Take My Breath Away

TANYA KARIM

They say that life is not measured  
by the number of breaths we take  
But by the moments  
that take our breath away.

Yet we presuppose  
our breathing as rudimentary  
Inhaling and exhaling,  
an act deemed so ordinary.

To breathe is to live,  
to live is to love  
Experiencing true love  
Surely a divine gift from above.

At the sight and mention  
of the beloved  
The lover does deeply breathe  
Adorning the heart in a wreath.

Promising to never part till death  
Starting the day with the beloved's  
name  
Nights ending inhaling their breath.

A smile of joy and a sigh of sorrow  
Respiration taken for granted  
As if there were no tomorrow.

Love is but a thief  
that steals your breath and soul  
Is love then, the oxygen of the soul?  
Which keeps the spirit alive  
To respire is to roll.

Then what becomes  
of this precious life  
For what is all this strife ?

Exhilarating adventures,  
natural wonders destinations unseen  
extracts bemused gasps  
breathtaking sights and memories  
of places we had been.

The single Divine breath  
which our Creator did blow



upon a lump of clay  
and lo man was created  
the one that we all know.

The single breath  
that determines the fine line  
between life and the state of death.

Man's ingratitude  
And denial of the favors of his Lord  
The taking for granted  
Of the life giving breath  
The air most wanted.

Irked by this candour  
Its time to be tested  
By the supreme Commander  
The very organs that supply life  
sustaining air  
Upon which existence rests, life seems  
unfair.

Our breaths are now numbered  
Divine intervention of invisible  
soldiers  
Instil fear of invasion in our slumber.

Put to the test in the form of a round  
prickly ball

That travel from the nose to the lungs  
No vaccines yet to stall.  
Oblivious of race,  
color creed and societal rungs.

A rogue virus is what they call  
Over 2 million dead attacked by the  
thorny ball.

Weighing less than a gram  
Its now the time to give a damn.

Its not a pretty picture to see one gasp  
For that single breath which we let  
lapse.

Salvation in patience and repentance  
Salivating tongues moist with prayer  
In the hope that the Lord will desist to  
scare.

And once again shower  
His Divine love and care.  
A promise to stop needless death  
And return to us our lowly breath.

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# A Book, a Bookstore, a City and the Aftermath

RAANA HAIDER

During the long lockdown in early 2020, I took stock of my shelvedunread books. A mint-green hardback covered book-spine caught my eye;A *Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Almost always, I know the provenance of my books. Who? Where? When? Whom? Was it bought or gifted? Full-price or bargain-buy? On this book I drew a blank. In 2019, my sister had handed it over saying it belonged to me. It must have emerged from some carton of books that had travelled the globe with the family; got lost, then found by me during the 2020 pandemic.

On 29th May 2020, I opened the book and read the following inscription:

To Raana Ahmad  
Pappa  
Paris 17.5.'57  
A clear blue and white sticker states:  
W.H. Smith & Son  
English & French Books  
248 Rue de Rivoli PARIS

I do not recall ever having read this book. Sixty-three years after being gifted this book by my father on my birthday on 17th May, I started reading *Little Princess* in May 2020. In hand was not a treasure found in the attic but its equivalent. Enhanced by the patina of age, I was reuniting with a precious item of immense personal value and considerable historical context.

W.H. Smith & Son, "the largest English bookshop in Paris" in the "City of Light" opened its doors on the elegant Rue de Rivoli in 1903. It was a regular source of children's books for us living in Paris in the mid-1950s. Birthdays and good report card results merited books as gifts in those days. Purchases were sugared by a climb to the upstairs English Tearoom which offered a full traditional tea service: egg and cucumber finger sandwiches, scones with clotted cream and marmalade; also fruit and chocolate cakes. Those childhood taste-bud memories remain fixed in one's mind and tongue. Over following decades, WH Smith ("Son" dropped out) continued being a lure for a "peeping person" to browse books and more often than not a visit upstairs.

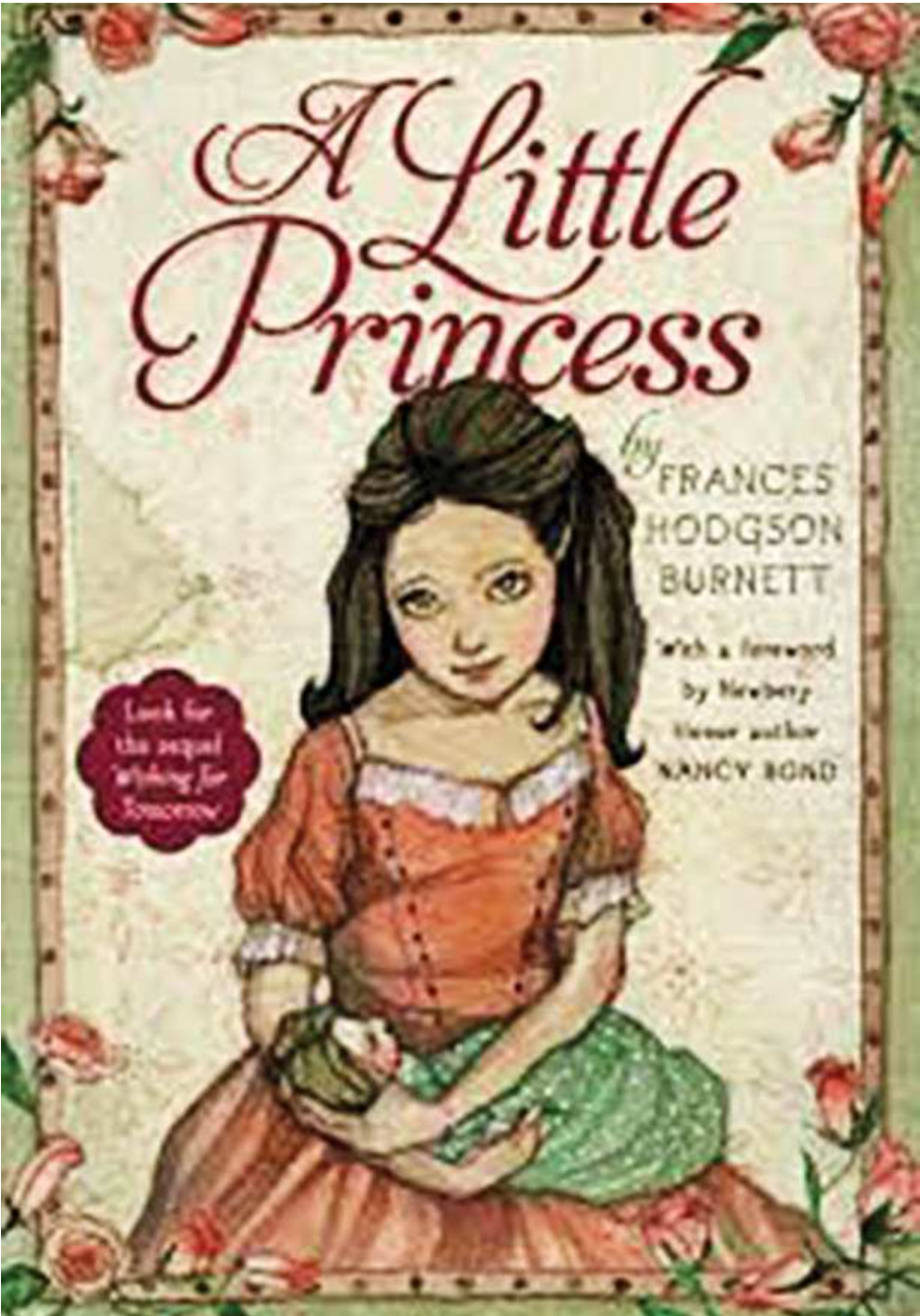
Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* is my current re-read for its heartfelt passages of devotion to Paris; including the unforgettable lines Hadley, Hemingway's wife marks: "There are so many sorts of hunger...Memory is hunger." My copy was bought on 12.09.97 notes the WHSmith sticker.I was once again living in Paris in the late 1990s. Mentioning to the salesperson my childhood association with this historical store brimming with beckoning books, I was presented with a "Carte de Fidelite" granting me 5% discount on purchases. My cup of wistful nostalgia was complete. I was told that many global customers return with such stories, now accompanied by their children and grandchildren. I had my daughter in tow.Only I was told that the English Tearoom had shut down sometime in the 1980s. Disappointment set in. The tea treat was part of the past and

much anticipated present; a rediscovery through random stimulations in the present. To my utter delight, while researching this write-up, I took note that in 2016 the British Tearoom on the first floor had reopened, sponsored by Twinnings of London. My "bucket list" in post-pandemic travel includes literary retail therapy downstairs and then culinary indulgence upstairs; while taking in the food with a view over the Tuileries gardens, the front facing landscape of the Louvre Museum.

Following reading *A Little Princess* and its personal Parisian association, I read *My Life in France* (1961) by Julia Child, the autobiography by the American celebrity chef whose books and television presentations on French cuisine became trademarks of her culinary expertise. I had bought this book few years back at W.H. Smith on Rue de Rivoli. With considerable amusement, I read of Julia's exasperation: "I've had it! I'm going to learn to speak this language, come hell or high water!...I signed up for a class at Berlitz...Paul, (husband and fluent in French) made up sentences to help my pronunciation: for the rolling French "r" s and extended "u" s, he had me repeat the phrase "Le serrurier sur la Rue de Rivoli" ("the locksmith on the Rue de Rivoli") over and over." Julia Child evolved into the consummate Francophile. An American cinema adaptation *Julia and Jules* was made in 2009 with Meryl Streep cast as the ebullient and efficient Julia Child.

Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1924) was a British-born novelist and playwright who moved to United States as a teenager. She gained lasting success writing for children: *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1885), *A Little Princess* (1905) and *Secret Garden* (1911). Although she had never been to India, the last two novels have Indian links and characters in the narrative. Once I Googled the author, I was taken aback to learn that *A Little Princess* was first adapted to screen as a silent film in 1917. The Hollywood child sweetheart Shirley Temple played Sarah Crewe in the 1939 "talkie" cinematic version of *A Little Princess*. In the 1970s, it was screened by the BBC as a mini-series; as well as a British-American production in the 1980s. The 1990s saw an American adaptation, a Filipino production as well as a Russian book-to-screen adaptation of this ever-green children's book. *A Little Princess* endured sufficient appeal for a Japanese drama television series in 2009. To my utter amazement, it is available on YouTube from 5th March 2020. Her literary classics have been on offer for over a century - from silent film screening to YouTube.

Sara Crewe "Little Missus," a seven-year old English girl accompanied by her doting father arrives in London at "Miss Minchin, Select Seminary for Young Ladies." "Big Missus" had died in British India at Sara's birth. The duo had sailed from Bombay to this place.Since the climate of India was very bad for children, and as soon as possible they were sent away from it - generally to England and to school...She was



to have a pretty bedroom and sitting room of her own; she was to have a pony and a carriage, and a maid to take the place of the ayah who had been her nurse in India." Miss Minchin sensing financial credentials in the Crewes' dress and demeanour; upfront pampers but underneath resents Sara. "Sara had always been an annoying puzzle to her, because severity never made her cry or look frightened. making no complaint or outward sign of rebellion."An introspective child, she becomes "Mama" to lonely motherless four year old Lottie. Sara befriends Ermengarde St. John, "... she took

fancy to fat, slow, little Miss St. John." Sara's otherfriend Becky is the over-worked scullery maid, a fourteen-year old girl "but so stunted in growth." Sara's closest friend and confidante is her doll Emily. Mature and resilient beyond her tender years, Sara seeks to maintain composure to combat lonely turmoil, rigid regulations and hostile surroundings.Escapism is her inner narrative in adversity; retreating to a make-believe world; leaving this world to live in another sphere where in her father's eyes she remains "A Little Princess."

The turning point in Sara's life comes when

her father goes bankrupt in a diamond mine scam in India and dies of "jungle fever." She is now eleven years old. Her new status is revealed to her by Miss Minchin: "I tell you that you are quite alone in the world...unless I choose to keep you here out of charity." A bare, cold attic becomes Sara's room. No longer a student, she is now a servant. When Sara becomes "One of the Populace" as the chapter is titled; despite her physical and emotional upheaval, a survival mentality prods her: "Her way of doing it was to "pretend" and "suppose" with all the strength that was left in her... And once or twice she thought it almost made her more cold and hungry instead of less so."

An attic window opening introduces her to her neighbour, an Indian turbaned "lascar" Ram Das who lives in the attic room "The Other Side of the Wall." He is appalled at the child's misery."The Magic" is instigated by Das and his English Saheb. Warm bedding, food, firewood and flowers appear in her room. Lo and behold, the narrative takes an even happier turn when Ram's employer is none other than her father's dear English friend from India who had also invested in the diamond mine. Only, there was no bankruptcy and Mr. Carrisford had been on the search for Sara who is the inheritor of a large fortune. Her imaginary role of "A Little Princess" becomes reality. "Once upon a time" could easily have been prefixed at the start of the story. And true to any fairy tale; Sara lives "happily ever after" as "A Little Princess." Any eight-year old would have been happy with its reading.

A unique literary experience has been measured some six decades later. The association between the book and its reader is enduring and textured; meaningfully layered with insight into human qualities, foibles and frailties. In these insecure times, do we not fall into moments of angst and despair? In the most unpromising of situations, there still lies the unexpectedness of the power of kindness, the offering of warmth and wisdom. In times of turmoil, internal and external; does not reading of choice offer a causeway to reflection, a hopeful window of escape? Here is a short read but replete with reflective thoughts and lasting takeaways. In the words of Zadie Smith, "Happiness is not an absolute value. It is a state of comparison."

Was *A Little Princess* a popular children's book recommended by the sales staff at W.H. Smith & Son? Was the Indian element influential in its selection? Did my father see it on display in the shop window? A bibliophile, had he read an article about the book and thought it would be an appropriate gift? Or did the book title simply appeal to him? I will never know. Pappa passed away in 1986.

*Raana Haider is the author of Parisian Portraits, The University Press Limited, Dhaka, 2000. Tara-India Research Press, New Delhi published a re-titled Paris, A Homage in 2007.*