

THE DEFINITIVE  
**YOUTH**  
MAGAZINE

# SHOUT

DHAKA THURSDAY JULY 29, 2021, SRABAN 14, 1428 BS

A PUBLICATION OF *The Daily Star*



SHANTINAGAR  
PG 4

GONE IN THE MORN  
PG 5



# fictitious

- 1. not real or true; imaginary or fabricated.*
- 2. occurring in or invented for fiction.*

VOLUME 2

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

# EDITORIAL

For readers with a keen eye, or even a lazy one, this week's SHOUT should look very different. It's prettier, and it's also an issue consisting only of fiction pieces. Stories and poems written by some of our best writers, adorned with breathtaking illustrations and photographs — the objective was to make this issue a collectible. I hope we have succeeded.

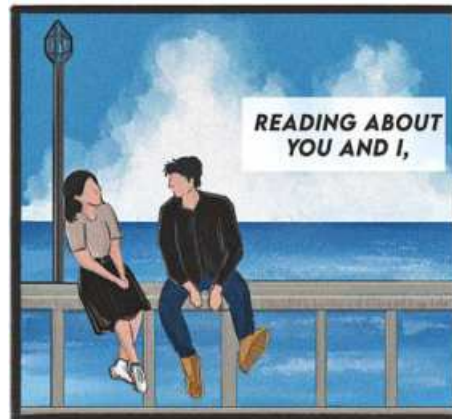
Fable Factory has been the longest running section of SHOUT. It's where I first got published many years ago, it's where the majority of our reader submissions end up getting published, and eventually, many of those readers become writers themselves, forging careers in the world of word processors and fonts. SHOUT's connection with fiction writing, and by extension (young) fiction writers, is storied. With this second instalment of Fictitious — our yearly special fiction issue — we want to expand on this connection because it is clear from my experience as fiction editor at this magazine that the Bangladeshi youth has stupendous stories to tell, we have raw, complex, and important emotions we are bursting to express.

SHOUT is proud to provide a window into this magic.

Azmin Azran, Sub-editor, SHOUT



AMOUR FICTIF  
 STORY/POEM BY: FAREEJA HUMAIRA MEEM MISTGHOST1398  
 STORYBOARDING/ART BY: TAHSEEN MOSTOFA CHOWDHURY SHARAKKHOMART



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# pooris, drones and withered dragons

FATIUL HUQ SUJOY

"How many?"

"Two. Aloo. I'm an aloo poori kind of a guy."

"Huh?" went the elderly poori wala, putting in the potato fillings.

"Nothing."

"Mana or might?"

"Mana."

The poori wala glanced up at Riyardh for the briefest moment before returning to his tablet. One of his arms was preparing the pooris, and the other one swooped in, picked them up and dropped them in the sizzling silvery mana oil. The gold oil in the cauldron beside it, Riyardh assumed, was might. In the cauldron behind the poori wala, the dark brown oil had the loudest crackle.

"What's that?" Riyardh pointed.

"Oil."

"Brilliant, but what kind?"

"The expired kind."

A drone buzzing around the poori wala started beeping.

"Agh, these annoying things," he groaned. His fourth hand picked up a few pooris from the expired oil and the fifth packed them in a newspaper bag. A sixth arm held the bag in front of the drone's lens. It scanned the code on the bag and flickered green while the poori wala checked the payment on his tablet and placed the bag inside the drone's compartment. The drone bolted into the drone streams heading to the upper district.

Riyardh was fascinated by the high demand of delicacies from this place, as evident by the number of drones hovering around. The shops, lined under the shelter of the massive Track that snaked through the city, formed the longest stretching market ecosystem of this era.

Beyond the single lamps, each shop was softly lit by the luminescent moss growing on the Track's towering pillars. The market resembled an old painting Riyardh had seen of a river at night, dotted with an array of fishing boats, faintly floating under the glow of a half moon.

"What a beautiful view," he sighed.

The poori wala scoffed, handing him the fried pooris. "I'm being serious."

"I can smell yer stinkin' jest from a mile away, uppy boy."

Riyardh had heard "uppy boy" before, but never confronted it. Then again, he'd never come down here before.

"What're ye doin' here? Did yer lordie dad kick ya out of yer tall tower?"

"First of all... my father... isn't... a lord," Riyardh replied in between bites. With each gulp, he felt the surge of mana pumping through his blood. "I'm my own man, an executive product manager, if you must."

"I mustn't."

"Secondly, I came to the Night Shift Market—"

"Ye mean the Leaky Market," the poori wala interjected. The Track, despite its width, could not shelter the market from the regular heavy rain, which leaked through the cracks of the structure. Hence, the name.

"Yes. I mean, no. That's not nice to say."

"Neither's whatever mighty shifty gibberish ye brought from yer fancy district. Call it what it actually is – Ton-drapoth Bazar."

Riyardh nodded. "Y-yes, sir."

The poori wala let out a measured laugh. "Sir? Such courtesy for an ol' Duskshade lowlander? Flatterin'."

With a hasted motion, Riyardh conjured a dark object, cylindrical and pointed, from under his sleeve. All of the poori wala's arms stopped as he glared at what was a folded umbrella. Riyardh breathed in and dropped it over his shoulder, "The rain's coming."

The poori wala sniffed. The air held the familiar scent of an approaching downpour.

"So," Riyardh continued calmly, as practiced from his lessons as a management trainee. "I want to propose a deal with the Bazar."

"A jokester, huh?" the poori wala started fuming.

"What d'ye mean a deal with the Bazar? I've met uppies like ye. All fancy, no heart. Intent as black as the tar ye shit outta yer towers."

"You have an asset that we can use. In exchange, we give you the ropes to climb up to the Cloudward district."

"Ropes? We don't need none of yer trickery."

"Oh, but you do, you've needed it for months, the missing piece to your great plan," Riyardh smiled. "And I need that secret weapon of yours."

\*\*\*

Panic, slowly forming inside Tohimur, now at the mention of the "secret weapon", burst into a flurry of cybernetic arms, aimed at the kid's throat.

Too late. The point of the kid's umbrella, still folded, touched the controller on Tohimur's chest. A silver-green thread of mana travelled from the kid's hand, through the umbrella, to the controller and puffed out. The arms that reached his throat lay around, unmoving.

"Limbtech. Discontinued, cheap and immensely useful. Susceptible to modern magic," the kid swallowed the last of his poori. Its tendrils of silver smoke blurred his face. He brought out his tablet.

"Ye a cop?"

He scoffed, "Did you not hear what I said? I'm not here to quash the Bazar's revolution. I'm here to help, for a price."

Tohimur heard commotion around him. The delivery drones were going haywire.

"Your brethren are too busy to hear your screams. Don't bother." The drones around Tohimur's shop assembled around the kid. "Where did you get it by the way? Did it fly up from the Burial district?"

"How do ye know about this, ye fiend?"

"As a product manager, I get access to products. Lucky for me, they have a penchant for collecting data."

Tohimur saw it now. The emblem on the kid's umbrella and his tablet. Defeated, motionless, Tohimur sighed quietly, "No."

\*\*\*

As the drones flew towards the dark underside of the Track, Riyardh shot embers at the two neighbouring pillars, burning down the luminescent moss. He then pointed his umbrella at the lights, discharging the tech. Darkness, and rain, fell on the Bazar.

Opening his umbrella, Riyardh squinted at the underside. A translucent webbing covered the surface. "Clever," he smirked and tapped his tablet. The drones shot rays of light at it.

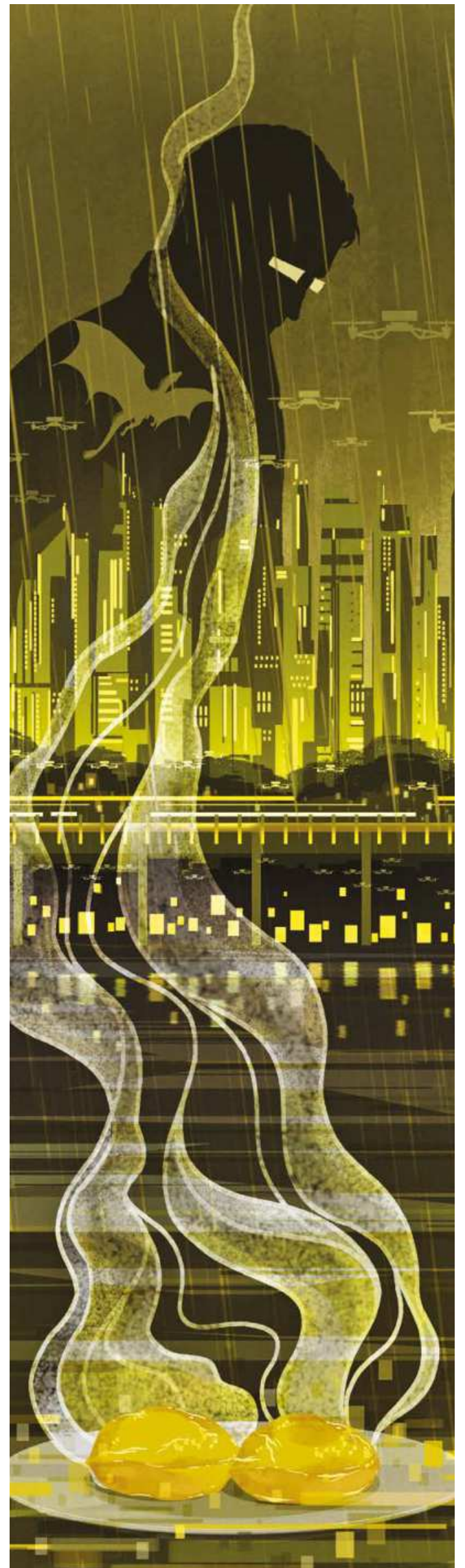
"Wow," Riyardh gasped. A dragon lay there, stretched between two pillars. The massive beast, like all who resided in the Buried district, was devoid of any colour. Its opal eyes reflecting a dozen colours. Sickly, gigantic, and mesmerising. But what caught Riyardh off guard was stacked within the dragon's protective stance. Eggs. Six of them.

"Brilliant!" Riyardh exclaimed. "You outdid yourselves. In the disregarding shadow of the Track, you really pulled off a miracle."

"And now ye brought its bloody ruin."

Before Riyardh could respond, or connect with the eggs, the ground cracked. Riyardh was offered a moment to reach for the trickles of mana still within. Beneath him, as the concrete gave way to the Buried's darkness, wings unfurled, withered and colossal, led by fangs of revenge.

*Fatiul Huq Sujoy spends idle hours preparing for his urban surroundings to finally turn into a fantasy setting. Send him pictures of your rakkhosh-spotting at s.f.huq11@gmail.com*



# shantinagar

ADHORA AHMED

This entire city was engulfed in chaos.

Everywhere he went — the *kachabazars*, the bus stands, the banks of the poison-black river — there seemed to be no respite from noise, or from the concrete blocks of buildings, towering over him imposingly. Instead of trees, the roads were flanked by electric poles, and instead of branches, they were threaded by coils of wire more tangled than a crow's nest.

Clouds of dust always swirled around him, making him cough a little too much. He wondered what exactly, other than the prospect of money, made so many people gravitate towards this city like moths to flame. Even he knew that he would be sent to this ugly place as soon as he was of age. But why was he here now, so soon? How did he get here?

Then suddenly, from nowhere, all the clouds broke loose and crashed on his face.

Montu jolted awake from the shock of cold water. The others hovered over his head, giggling at his dumbfounded expression. In the bluish darkness of pre-dawn, he made out a plastic mug in Joshim's hand.

Before he could retaliate, Montu heard Ripon da's singsong voice coming from the doorway.

"Wake up, children!

The sun is rising,

And we must keep moving!"

At their leader's command, the boys and girls scurried off to pack the last of their things. Someone lobbed a *gamchha* at Montu to wipe his head. Before long, the group left the ramshackle hut of mud and thatch where the twelve of them had spent the last few nights. They were back on the narrow dirt path canopied by trees, the sky above painted in bruised purples and angry oranges. In the distance, a rooster announced the arrival of morning.

Ripon da was, as always, striding at the front, in his ratted clothes and wiry hair. If he sensed the children were lagging behind and showing the first signs of fatigue, he would start plucking his *ektara* and sing something to cheer them on. But he would not allow them to stop or rest until he explicitly commanded them to. He never really said they were forbidden to speak up; it was an unwritten rule. Another was that the children couldn't speak among themselves while they were on the road. Hence, they marched on, silently, to a destination whose existence Montu was growing sceptical of day by day.

*Did Shantinagar really exist?*

"Of course, it does!" Tuli told him the first night they stopped at the hut they just left behind.

Montu tried to convince his sister of his misgivings in the dark. They were behind the outhouse, facing away from the back of the hut so no one could see them. Tuli acted like she was still loyal to Ripon da, but he could tell from her constant blinking and her feigned incredulous expression that doubt had seeped into her heart, too.

"You can't say these things," Tuli had whispered finally, eyes widened in fear. "What will Ripon da think?"

Later in life, Montu would look back at how Ripon da had ensnared his web over their village. He couldn't recall the first time he saw the man, but he was a familiar face of the countless *melas* that passed through Hemganj throughout the years. He had a full, euphonious voice and an *ektara*, which he used to summon the attention of the villagers, mostly effective on the young. He plucked the one-stringed instrument and sang about his homeland, Shantinagar, somewhere between heaven and Earth — a utopian land of abundance where only peace reigned, because it was ruled by children with no adults to boss them around.

Then, somehow, Ripon da settled down in Hemganj. He would hold court every afternoon under the banyan tree in the *bazar*, regaling the children with tales of Shantinagar in his trademark singsong voice. Montu and Tuli would sit on the dirt around him with the other children, enthralled under the golden hue of the sun.



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

"Why did you leave that place if it's so peaceful?" Sohel, who rarely attended these sessions, asked once.

"Because I grew up," Ripon da deadpanned, eliciting giggles. "No grown-ups there, remember?"

Then came the warnings, especially from the older children who tried to avoid Ripon da as much as they could.

"Don't flock around him so much," cautioned Sohel, whose voice had just broken. "My father says he's an agent of the devil."

"Do you really believe everything he says?" Masuda would try to reason. "Whatever land he babbles on about sounds a bit too much like the description of paradise in the holy books."

A few days after *nobanno*, the *morol* of Hemganj interrupted their session with his henchmen, the doctor, and the headmaster in tow. These men never liked Ripon da.

"You've been filling these kids' heads with cow dung for far too long," the *morol* gnashed his teeth. "If I ever see you again, I will make sure you rot in prison."

Ripon da fled that very night, but not without leaving a message. Only the loyal few would sneak out to his hideout in the bamboo grove near Khaturbari. There, they saw a different version of Ripon da. He was no longer the merry songster they knew, but a solemn strategist. Ripon da hatched plans of their escape, promising to guide them by routes where they would never get caught. They were in awe of how much he knew of the world far beyond the environs of Hemganj.

The final destination was Shantinagar, where they could live happily for the rest of their childhood, away from narrow-minded adults.

Montu realised, as the sky turned bluer, that it had been two weeks since he left home. Two weeks since he had his favourite meal of his mother's *aloo bharta* with rice. It would take him another two weeks for the resentment to grow into a decision fuelled by anger, for him to diffuse his rage into Tuli through hushed arguments on their stopovers. He was not capable of starting a rebellion against such an enigmatic riddle as Ripon da, whose knack for authoritarianism was beginning to grow more overt, but he could at least take his sister back home with him. He would remember how the ugly city in his dream was more real than whatever Shantinagar was.

It was early when Tuli and Montu ran away. The sky was in bruised purples and angry oranges.

Years later, on a Friday when they both had a day off, Montu and Tuli would go to Shantinagar. Dhaka was extremely alienating with the sheer magnitude of its chaos, but after years of adjustments and readjustments, this place felt more like home than Hemganj, which they tried to visit on long holidays.

They would wander in silence as the cacophony engulfed them, stopping near Rajarbagh Police Lines, and watch the construction work of a flyover.

"Ripon da didn't lie, then," Tuli would break the silence. "Shantinagar truly exists."

They would laugh, but only briefly, because they would mourn the rest of their friends who still hadn't returned to their families.

Adhora Ahmed listens to too many "sad white boy" songs. Recommend her better music at [adhora.ahmed@gmail.com](mailto:adhora.ahmed@gmail.com)

# Gone in the Morn

UPOMA AZIZ

The flickering, tall candle flame licked the air like a gecko with a fiery tongue trying to catch a whiff of its surroundings — to sense the suffocation, the sweat, and the fear.

The creatures of the dark feed on the fear of others.

The soft, golden light smoothed the edges of everything it fell upon; the shadows were long and numerous. It was an illusion to make the eye miss the details of the mundane world, only so that the things unperceivable to the eye catch the attention of the summoner. A fragrance like a lullaby galloped across the room in nomadic steps.

If an old wives' tale were to come to life, this is what it would smell like.

The world outside was dark, the barrier between the worlds was said to be the thinnest this night of the year. A whisper, a call desperate enough and they would visit. An eye for an eye, they too would take something in return. Everything comes at a price, after all. The summoner touched the flame to the candles arranged in an intricate motif. The ritual had begun.

The chamber was scented, the robe was stainless. To make a claim on the spirits that drifted across the lands, there needed to be an invitation. The summoner took the long, glistening needle out of its case and pricked the tip of a finger. The blood turned a carmine shade under the yellow fire, and then dissolved into a delicate pattern in the water of the bowl. Next were the incantations, the same ancient words uttered for centuries to beseech the unexplained. The mirror would

act as the window for communication, and for once it would not mock the one standing in front of it.

The rite was carried out word for word, and if all went well, there would be a sighting, at least. To or not to open the eyes was still the choice of the summoner. If they could hold on till daylight came, whatever did visit would leave.

A faint hum followed a ripple in the air. It was peculiar and familiar at the same time. Someone was either weeping softly or singing gently, there was no certain way to know. As the noise grew more intense, an uneasy feeling began to sprout in the pit of the summoner's stomach.

"Tuktuki!" A smooth, mischievous voice called out loud and clear, cutting across the stuffiness like Jell-O. The summoner jolted her eyes open. Her reflection in the mirror was still the same, but her throat felt like firewood. The person in the mirror slowly transformed from her to another woman with the same build and height, stormy grey hair, and wise, stern eyes.

"It's way past midnight! Why are you summoning spirits at this hour? Don't you have school tomorrow?" the woman spitballed at the summoner.

"I don't! I finished school, and college too," Taharat said, "Grandma? How are you here?"

"You called on me, didn't you?" the older lady squinted, "Wait. You didn't specifically call on me. Why didn't you? I'm hurt." She crossed her arms and huffed.

"Well, I — the possibility didn't really occur to me. I didn't think general spirits and dead relatives were in

the same category," Taharat shrugged apologetically.

"So you need a spirit to do your bidding," Grandma said. "What's the task?"

"I'm not sure if this can be called a task. I want to pursue higher education in creative writing but I am fresh out of ideas so I thought —"

"So you thought a spirit who wanders between land and limbo with nothing to do would be a good place to start?"

"No, I —" Taharat halted. "Wait, that's what you do? Just float in nowhere?"

"No, it was a figure of speech," Grandma chortled. "We don't have a distinctive heaven or hell either, it's more like... an upscale, uptight neighbourhood and a more laid back one. I was placed in what you folks will call heaven, but it was..." Grandma stopped to shiver, "It was so boring."

Taharat giggled, "Boring?" "Yes. Like you can't imagine. All the people there are so nice, *too nice*. All that happens are meetings about love, recovery and gratefulness. Everyone has this creepy smile plastered on their face. Everyone goes to bed by eight!"

"But, Grandma," Taharat asked cautiously. "They sound like good people. Why would you leave?"

"Oh, I didn't leave because of the people," Grandma waved her hand dismissively. "It was because of the food. High in vitamins, minerals, and very healthy. No junk food and no snacks, and absolutely no seasoning. It was horrifying."

Taharat vaguely remembered her grandmother's love for greasy, spicy

food and nodded sombrely, "That must have been very hard for you."

"It's all good now. The people here are somewhat crude and sometimes mean but I take it all in good humour. And I cook for the troublemakers sometimes too, so they respect me," Grandma chuckled.

"It looks like you got yourself settled then," Taharat's gaze fell on the clock on the wall. "Grandma, the sun is going to come up soon."

"You haven't kept your side of the bargain, though. You owe me in exchange for my time. You have to pay a price for making a deal with the devil. Those are the rules," Grandma stated.

"Okay," Taharat replied. "What do I owe you?"

"Do you have one of those bottles of hot sauce? It would be great if you emptied one over an open fire under my name," Grandma beamed.

"Yeah, I can do that," nodded Taharat.

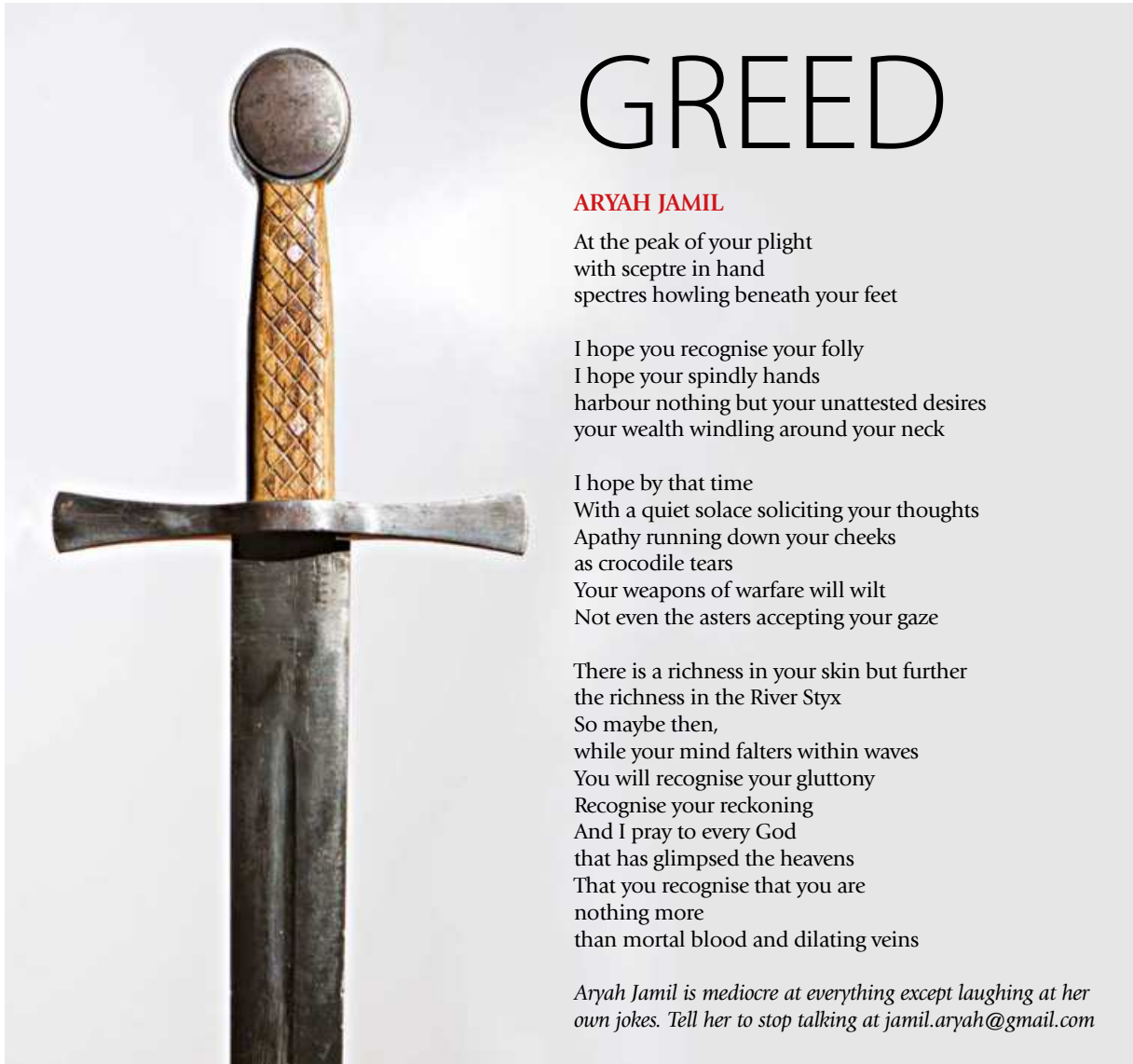
"Wonderful! I'll take my leave then."

Grandma seemed to notice the burnt-out candles scattered all over for the first time, "All this is flattering, but if you want to talk to me, just burn some chili flakes after midnight and tap on the mirror. Except for Wednesdays, though. Wednesday is game night."

"Goodbye, Grandma," Taharat waved, and realised her reflection was back. "Oh, well," she said, and went on the quest for hot sauce.

*Upoma Aziz is a slouching, crouching, grouchy goblin with a hoarding addiction. It's probably best if you do not contact her.*

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA



# GREED

**ARYAH JAMIL**

At the peak of your plight  
with sceptre in hand  
spectres howling beneath your feet

I hope you recognise your folly  
I hope your spindly hands  
harbour nothing but your unattested desires  
your wealth windling around your neck

I hope by that time  
With a quiet solace soliciting your thoughts  
Apathy running down your cheeks  
as crocodile tears  
Your weapons of warfare will wilt  
Not even the asters accepting your gaze

There is a richness in your skin but further  
the richness in the River Styx  
So maybe then,  
while your mind falters within waves  
You will recognise your gluttony  
Recognise your reckoning  
And I pray to every God  
that has glimpsed the heavens  
That you recognise that you are  
nothing more  
than mortal blood and dilating veins

*Aryah Jamil is mediocre at everything except laughing at her own jokes. Tell her to stop talking at jamil.aryah@gmail.com*



# Dorothy in Wonderland

**SYEDA ERUM NOOR**

Love bows down to those who wage  
Hidden wars not seen or heard  
To those who hover upon Earth  
As long-lost souls  
Who've found their peace.

Hate shivers in green jealousy  
When they decide to pass it by  
For wounded soldiers rarely feel  
Of throbbing hearts and broken skin

The sky withers from ash to blue  
Once warm now turned to iron wear  
When hearts slither off brazen sleeves  
And harden into welded dreams  
Of younger boys in hallowed lights  
And Dorothy in Wonderland.

Then is when clocks stop to talk.  
To tell you of their ancient lives  
Once lived  
Then pinned to plastered walls  
A soldier's friend who dares not kill.

Magic spun from lullabies  
Of feathered guns and holy lies.  
Here wizards rarely walk the grounds  
Their feet, too soft for reddened hounds.

*Syeda Erum Noor is dangerously oblivious and has no sense of time. Send help at erum.noor1998@gmail.com*

# Stars Shaped Like Your Hand

**MOHUA MOULI**

I knew you were in a hurry that night.  
You packed your things so fast,  
The clothes flew into your bag  
At the speed of light  
Creating a haphazard spectacle of colours  
Mimicking the demolition  
Of our melded emotions.

You flew into the night sky  
In a white plane with blue lights  
Blinking, as if fluttering with excitement  
A butterfly with blue wings  
Landed on the windowsill  
New company is always welcome  
In my home.

A crow cawed in the backdrop  
Of my daydream  
A contrasting highlight to the sparrows  
That sang on your new front porch  
Are you still looking for her?  
Or have you settled down?  
The letters are always full of joy  
I see it in the words  
Where your hand dragged over the wet ink.

The ink is also blue  
And the smears trail

Like the waves in the ocean  
I remember watching your fingers  
Trying to touch the clouds  
Mine curled like the locks in your hair  
When we sat together alone  
And watched the waves  
And the water on your skin glimmered  
Like silver in the moonlight.

My home is now home to many  
Lost birds, insects and toads  
My heart cocooned in a blanket of moss  
Still trying to catch fireflies in the dark  
Your warmth is now a memory  
Shaped like the wind  
Creating a dazzling display  
Over the surface of my pond.

Sometimes when I try to find  
My favourite triplet of stars  
I see some blue lights flicker  
In the distance  
The rhythm imitating a glowing heartbeat  
Trapped in the melody of a song  
It is enough to last this lifetime apart.

*Mohua Mouli is an indecisive artist and thinker who also happens to be a sales manager. Send her questions about life at mohua210@gmail.com*



# The Midwife

**RABITA SALEH**

It was three o'clock at night and raining as though all hell had broken loose. Thunder and lightning like you had never witnessed before. The narrow lanes of Old Dhaka were flooded with murky water already, and yet the sky continued to wage its war as though determined to obliterate us.

I swear I told my husband I could feel it in my bones – something unholy was brewing that night.

In the midst of this chaos, there was a knock on our iron door. Well, I say knock, but it was, in reality, a thundering of fists loud enough to rival the din of the sky. I was used to late night calls. It was somewhat of an occupational hazard. However, that night, I remember feeling an inexplicable sense of unease. A poor soul was likely in need of my aid though, so I shoved my qualms aside, wrapped my saree around my head, reassured my husband that it was probably the usual call, and went downstairs to answer the door.

It was as I expected. A desperate man, a cry for help – all too familiar. What wasn't familiar, what was completely unexpected, was the sheer radiance of the man standing in front of me. He was beautiful. There was no other word for it. He looked oddly surreal. He was, also, a stranger. I would remember a face like this if I had seen it around.

To top it all off, he was crying. Tears on the face of an angel. My heart nearly broke at the sight, and I'll tell you I've seen some sorry sights in my time. I told him I would accompany him, motioning for him to lead the way. That was when he made the most peculiar addition to his request. He said I would have to follow him to his abode blindfolded.

I gasped. There was no way I would do such a thing. He kept begging but the request was simply ridiculous. I stepped back, and even began shutting the door, when he fell to his knees on the filthy asphalt. He swore he wouldn't ask this of me if it wasn't absolutely necessary.

*"My love is in pain. She will die without you. Please help me midwife. Do me this favour."*

I sighed. My heart softened. I couldn't turn him away. I agreed. He got up then, and swiftly produced a pitch-black blindfold. He tied it around my eyes, and took my hand to lead me onward.

Something strange happened then, for I don't remember the consequent journey at all. The blindfold didn't just seem to impair my vision, it must have deprived me of all my senses, because I don't even recall placing one foot in front of the other. In what had to be just the blink of an eye, we had reached our destination, and I was having my blindfold removed.

For all my excitement at having regained my sight, the house I had stepped into was extremely ordinary. It could have been the interior of any old house. The half-mint half-white walls, the high ceilings with long hanging fans, the wicker chairs, and

the mosaic floors were all utterly commonplace. The bedroom, too, once we had gone inside, was the same. In fact, the iron wardrobe and the four-poster bed could have been taken right out of my own house.

The woman on the bed though, was another story altogether. I had been subconsciously expecting this ever since I met her partner, and yet she still managed to exceed all my expectations. If her mate had been beautiful, she was truly exquisite. Wearing a long white maxi dress, with her lush dark hair splayed over the edge of the bed, she was a vision of absolute perfection.

It was no surprise therefore that it took me a second to register that she was posi-

the man approached me. He seemed to exclude happiness from every cell in his body.

"Midwife, you have done us a great service today. I don't have any paper money for you, but I insist that you go to my kitchen and take as much coal from the stove as you desire."

Before I could overcome my incredulity at being paid in coal, the man continued.

"Once you have taken the coal however, you are to leave immediately. When you step outdoors you will find yourself at the mouth of the street on which you reside. Now this is imperative. Do not look back. Trust me, I say this for your sake alone, do not look back on your way out. Take the

from behind me. With the intention of taking my own small revenge on the couple, I glanced back towards the middle room.

Babies. Not two, but six. A total of twelve wide open, intelligent eyes peered up at me, sparkling with joy. These were not the eyes of any human child born less than half an hour ago. And they didn't just look at me. They giggled, with perfect sets of pearly white teeth, as though immensely pleased to see me. They were so lovely I felt my heart wrench painfully with love. Or maybe it was fear, for they weren't lying down. They weren't sitting either. They were climbing the chairs, the wardrobes, there was even one sitting atop one wing of the



ILLUSTRATION: NOOR US SAFA ANIK

tively writhing in excruciating pain. Her partner had rushed to her side the minute we arrived, and was now cooing words of comfort in her ear. They were barely audible to me, but from what I could decipher, it didn't sound like any language I had ever heard.

Once the initial shock had passed, I was in my element. Odd though they were, they were just another couple in need of my assistance and I had done this a thousand times. I quickly issued commands to the man, and got to work on relieving the poor angel from her agony. The delivery went as smoothly as ever. Unsurprisingly from her size, she gave birth to twins. Two gorgeous faces, with all forty fingers and toes, who I placed on either side of their mother.

Once he was sure of his partner's health,

coal. And leave. Do you understand me, midwife?"

I nodded my comprehension.

However, as I made my way towards the kitchen, I remember feeling distinctly cheated. This man was probably just taking advantage of their unusual appearance to trick me into rendering him a service free of cost. All this trouble and for what? Coal! I sighed.

Taking two large pieces of coal from the huge stove anyway, since we were in fact out at home, I stowed them within the folds of my saree, and then headed for the door. With my hand over the knob however, I felt this insane rebellious urge.

"Don't look back... for your own good." What codswallop.

There were some soft noises coming

stationary ceiling fan. And to complete this scene of grotesque magnificence – they were all pale blue.

That was when I must have fainted. The next thing I remember is being tucked in bed by my husband, who swore I hadn't gone anywhere last night. Was it all a dream then? I was only beginning to believe that when I heard two loud clangs of some heavy objects crashing to the ground. The pieces of coal I had tucked into my saree?

I bent to pick them up. Only, they weren't coal anymore. They were two solid medallions of pure glittering gold.

*Rabita Saleh is a perfectionist/workaholic. Email feedback to this generally boring person at rabitasaleh13@gmail.com*

# Your Sound

**TAQDIRUL ISLAM**

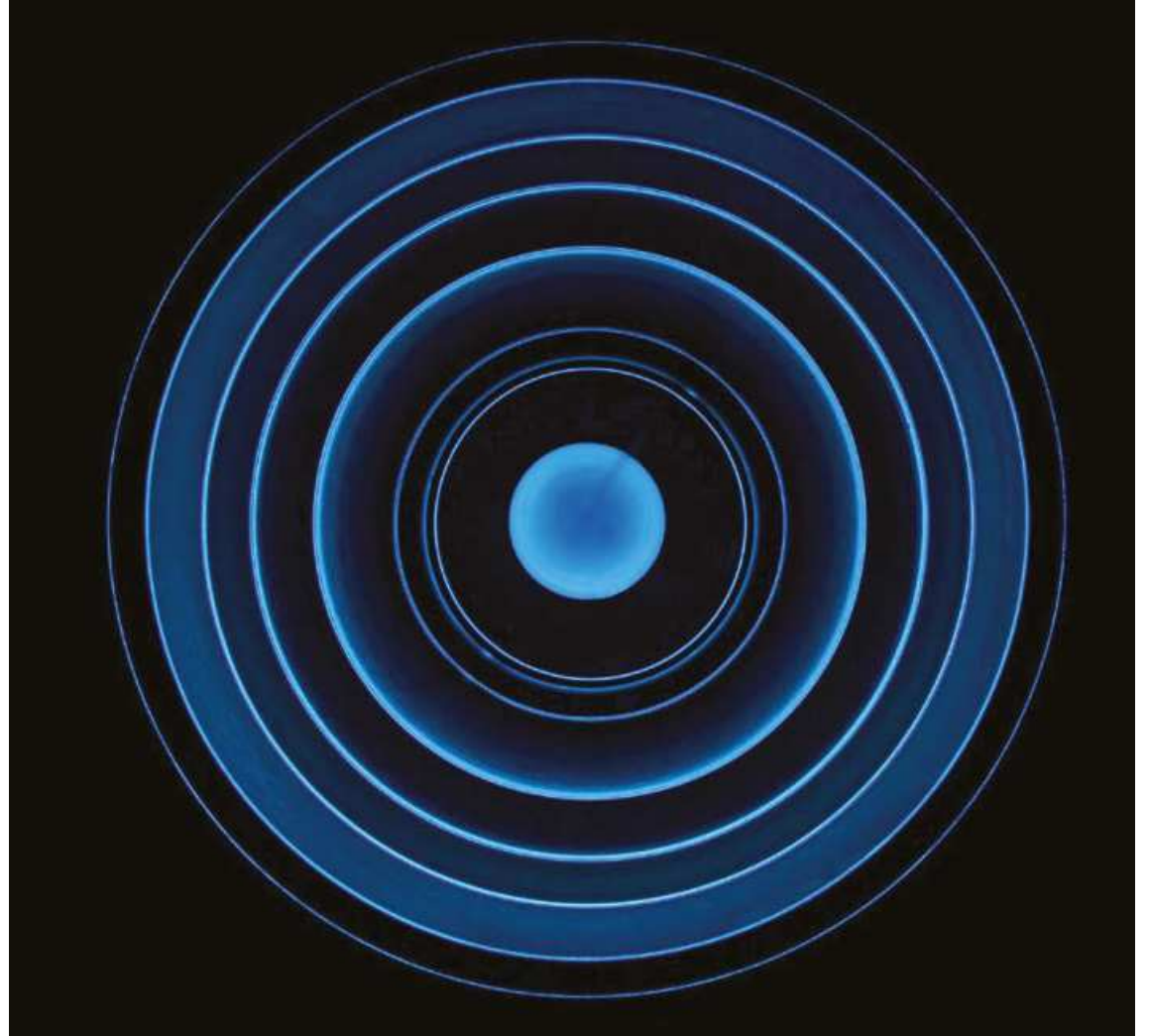
The sound of your voice is a song.  
 It is to my ears like a lather of soap to a miner's skin.  
 It is vital, it's a tidal wave on desert sand.  
 It soothes me like honey tea soothes a throat.  
 It's smooth, viscous, and it makes me shiver.

The sound of your laugh is playful.  
 It lifts my heart because it means you're happy,  
 Or at least something close to that.  
 It starts low and ends high, it's so beautiful  
 It makes me cry. Your laugh is therapy.

The sound of your speech is awe inspiring.  
 It gets attention, it puts the message across.  
 Whatever you say makes sense because you say it,  
 Or maybe it's the other way around.  
 I could listen to you speak forever, and the day after.

I wish I was on the phone with you now,  
 You would speak and I would listen.  
 Maybe I could make you laugh,  
 Or maybe none of that happens and we stay quiet  
 As you breathe and exist. That would be enough.

*Taqdirul Islam is a pigment of someone's imagination, he's blue and yellow and purple. Tell him what other colours he can be at itaqdirul@gmail.com*



# Paper Drifters

**MAISHA NAZIFA KAMAL**

I'm not sure if I should call this waking up, or unveiling, or anything, for that matter. It's something I don't have a name for, a sudden feeling of just... existing, being present somewhere I can't quite fathom.

*Where am I? What am I?*

The answers dawn upon me slowly, as if waiting for it to sink into this sudden, strange existence.

I am a photo of a person, printed in black and white, in a newspaper.

The fact that I am just a picture which can have functional thoughts and feelings, doesn't take me off guard. I read the words below my picture as if I am a human being reading the newspaper while having a cup of tea.

The words are brief and stoic, like they've been bleached and stripped off emotions and colours. Just some black ink-creatures over white.

The words read that I had died from an accident yesterday. The signal was red and I was crossing the road, but a bus sped through and ran me over. End of story.

There were some other trivial details which I can't remember a thing about. Not much about the driver. Not much about my life.

I try to remember how it felt to die, how much pain I endured, how my life was before a bus ran me over. Would knowing that explain my newfound existence? But no matter how much I try, it feels like I am reaching out from underneath a black cloak that's persistent in its position. I give up eventually and focus on the newspaper.

Here, there are uncountable words that might seem like they are just innocently black, but they're dripping with the blood of death, corruption, evil, and suffering. It's unimaginable how so many deaths are casually depicted in this world of black and white, how the cries and anguish of so many people are written in muted words. There's a



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

fair share of good news here too, and some that are neutral but they are like fleeting specks of light lost in an abyss of darkness.

I skim through the stories every day, from one print to another. Some linger for a while; some can merely hold out for only a day. With each passing day, my quality of being unbothered falls apart slowly. Fraction by fraction, I long to recall my human life. I also try to picture what I've left be-

hind. I don't know how I can see myself but that's all I can do. The picture of me has me wearing a formal shirt, and a synthetic smile. Past this picture, I can't know anything of my existence even though I want to know beyond it.

Slowly, I feel more disturbed than ever. The world I left behind starts brimming with more deaths. The newspaper has more pictures like mine. The multitude of reasons they die for sometimes makes me think of my death as a comparatively easy one. I keep wondering who's reading about me. In newer prints, I still exist so there must be people who still care for me. There is some more information now under my same old picture. Some people are protesting for me, a trial is going on. However, bit by bit the information starts to disappear. I see my neighbouring pictures slowly recede, until they are no longer there in the newest print.

I try more than ever now, to make myself undo that smile, to strain my muscles in this canvas of paper to form a sound. It's all futile. A picture can't talk, scream, cry on its own accord but I try all the same. I feel like this would give me leverage, make me stay here. Strangely, I didn't want to let go of this existence.

But if you can't survive as a human, can you survive as a small picture? That, too, in a newspaper?

So, with time, I start to wane. I can feel the newspaper getting discarded, people throwing it away, someone using it to wrap boxes and gifts. The words start to dwindle, they bid farewell to me to leave for some new guests. My space starts to get smaller until a kid makes a paper plane out of it. I feel my picture through the folds and creases those little hands make.

The smile has been deformed, finally.

*Maisha Nazifa Kamal has lost track of time and is living in a world where she never existed. Break her reverie at 01shreshtha7@gmail.com*