

POETRY

Ahsan Habib's

On the First-floor Landing: a Duologue

TRANSLATED BY MD MEHEDI HASAN

Two flats facing each other
He's on the stairs, she's at the door

: Leaving, aren't you?
: Yes, all packed up.
: It's been around two years, no?
: More than that; your nickname is Shanu, full name?
: Shahana, yours?
: Mabu.
: I know.
: Mahbub Hossain. You sew well.
: Who told you? You're in Honours final year, no?
: Yes, final—this year.
: Honours in Physics.
: It's surprising! Why did you quit suddenly?
: Mom doesn't want it. I mean—sitting with the boys and all...
: Forget it, has your foot healed?
: How did you know?
: Whatever. Healed?
: That's nothing, slipped in the passage, I mean...
: Not true, falling down from a height...
: Fudge! Is provoking your mother every day at the dining table really necessary?
: Has my mom told you?
: Overheard, many a time. It's been around two years, no?
: More than that; has your tub-plant flowered?
: Want one? Let it go. Rickshaw has arrived, mom's here, bye.
: In the evening, don't read in dimmed light that way—it'll harm your eyes, bye.
: The button at the middle of your yellow shirt is missing, have it sewed, bye.
: Go, your mother's coming. My mom's also calling me, bye.

Ahsan Habib is a Bangla Academy Literary Award and Ekushey Padak winning Bangladeshi poet and literary figure.

Md Mehedi Hasan occasionally contributes to the Star literature page; he is a lecturer of English at North Western University, Khulna.



Aegri Somnia

HISHAM M NAZER

Darkness on a piece of paper
Black soaks the white
In a motion slower than the ceiling fan
That struggles to cool
With heat inside that's untouchable
Unreachable.

And in the corner of the eye
In the clear corner of the tired eye
That wants to surrender to sleep
The tall dark apparition of the cabinet
Comes alive every second,
Gets larger and creeps in
Through the crevices curved by tiredness
Administering the excitement of fear
That recognizes the unknown
After knowing the unrecognizable:
The dark ghastly figure of a disfigured thought
Darker than darkness, there and not there
The excitement of witnessing
The real and not real
In the territory of time
Claimed by dreams

I keep my eyes open
To see nothing
And after seeing it
I cannot close my eyes.

But in this little room that melts the bones
This room with walls that move
Could distant themselves like humans do
Yet they chose to close in,
Standing where they stand:
Square domes, Fibonacci spiral
The sound of sweat—an image from dream
Escapes the eyes and there
There on the ceiling
A certain slant of light
For a moment briefer than a second
Finds its way through the curtain
That conspires with the wind to conjure
A reality that is as unreal
As life itself.

Hisham M Nazer is Assistant Professor, Department of English, Varendra University.

They Took Away My Land

AHMAR MAHBOOB

They took away my land, I said:
Thank you for building the railroad.

They took away my wealth, I said:
Thank you for giving me loans.

They took away my language, I said:
Thank you for teaching me to speak.

They took away my traditions, I said:
Thank you for giving me culture.

They took away my wisdom, I said:
Thank you for building us schools.



They took away my values, I said:
Thank you for making me civilised.

They took away my honour, I said:
Thank you for being so kind.

They took away my people, I said:
Thank you for giving us jobs.

They took away my life, I said:
Thank you, you have saved my life.

Ahmar Mahboob is a Linguist. Currently, he is Associate Professor at the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney.



FICTION

The Burnt Forest

SAMIR HOSSAIN KHAN

Shengdey awoke suddenly on a bed with an old man sitting beside him.
"Are you okay, my child?" He asked, idly stirring a boiling pot of tea.
"I think so," the boy replied, rubbing his head. He sat up and looked around the place, trying to remember how he ended up there. The next thing he was met by was a slap.
"Stupid boy! How could you go there!"
"Ah! Ma, I'm sorry! I won't do it ever again!" He begged as pain flared in his swollen cheek.
His mother sighed and the old man handed her a cup of tea. "Here, drink this. It will help you gain your energy back." She gave it to her son and he shakily took the drink, sipping the spicy liquid. "Don't tell anyone where you've been, especially your father. And promise me you'll never return there. Understand?"
Shengdey just nodded, sipping his tea. And then the memories came flooding back.
He had gone out alone to explore the burnt forest. It was a patch of land consisting of burnt trees as far as the eye could see. No new plants grew there, and nobody knew how any of them burnt down. The parents of the village all agreed that this was not normal. All the parents would tell their children there was some monster out there and everyone should stay away from that place.
But Shengdey was not convinced. He had set out the previous afternoon, alone, to explore what he could find. He saw the burnt trees, just like the adults had described. And that's all he could remember. His memory was all blurry after that.
After drinking the tea he got up and walked out of the old man's tent. He heard barking and a bundle of grey fur ran up to him. "Hey, Chengkil! You really missed me, huh?" He said as he stroked the dog's fur all over. "Okay, boy, let's go."
Later that day, Shengdey was with his trusty axe, chopping some wood for the fire. As he swung his blade, he heard someone approaching. The boy was also carrying firewood accompanied by a girl the same age as him. "So, Shengdey, how did it go?"
He just huffed and continued chopping.
"Haha, you got a big scolding from your parents, didn't you?" The other boy laughed out loud.
"Oy, Radzonday, don't be so mean!" The girl nudged him. "Go there yourself if you think you're better than him!" She teased.
"Ah, sister Badma, you're always so sharp with your words. Anyway, Shengdey, did you



find anything?"
The boy shook his head. He recalled what little he had seen before he had fainted and they both listened intently. After that, they went their ways.
Later that night, Shengdey put on his scarf and headed outside his tent. In a piece of cloth, he had wrapped some pieces of boiled meat from dinner. Chengkil followed behind closely, led on by the food. He walked for some time until he reached the trees by the small stream where somebody was already waiting for him. Badma wrapped her shawl tightly around her head against the cold wind. Her eyes lit up as she saw the two figures approaching.
"Good that you brought him along. Okay, so remember what we planned?"
Shengdey nodded. "But are you going to stay here all night in the cold?"
She smiled softly. "You know I can endure the cold. Just get me that silver flower."
The myth of the silver flower was never shared with children for whatever reason but Shengdey had heard about it when he was spying on his parents and the old man one day. Even Badma had confirmed his suspicions. She told him that at night, under the full moon, she had seen a glow when she started out in the distance in the direction of the burnt forest.

And she had seen it multiple times. However, it only happened a few times a year and only under the full moon. She believed it was the silver flower she had heard whispers about.
This is why Shengdey was out at night. For quite a while now, they had been planning to get the flower, then run away and get married.
Carrying his dagger for protection and leading his dog, Shengdey made his way to the burnt forest under the light of the moon. Badma watched as she saw the familiar glow of the silver flower and the little light illuminated the two figures running through the night. She stood there, hugging the tree for support as the moonlight illuminated her figure. And she continued hugging it all through the night.
When she opened them, she saw the sun rising as dawn came. She looked around to check for Shengdey and Chengkil but saw nothing. Suddenly, from behind her, she heard a voice.
"Here you are! I got the flower!" Shengdey looked at her, smiling softly as he held a flower in his hand. The entire thing was made of silver, from the stem to the petals and it glistened in the dawn light. Badma held it in her hands, just admiring its form. It was as hard as metal itself. "We got the flower, should we run away now, my lady?"

"You flatter me," she shook her head. "But first we need to pack some things. Maybe we can leave tonight, or tomorrow night."
Shengdey nodded and the three of them made their way back.
The rest of the day passed as normal for the most part. Chengkil, the dog, would growl sometimes, looking straight ahead at Shengdey or Badma, even barking, then after a few seconds, this behaviour would suddenly stop.
Night came. Both of them made sure to pack their daggers and one of them even carried an axe. With thick furry clothes hugging their bodies and some more in their bags, the two fled in the middle of the night. That night, the girl made sure to wear something that made her look exceptionally beautiful. She had put the silver flower on a string decorated with pearls which her mother had bought "from a merchant from the cities in the south" for her birthday some time ago.
The trio walked until they reached the river that wound through the border of the burnt forest. They were hungry so they came to the edge of the river, looking for anything to eat. A fish swam too close and Shengdey stabbed it

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hard with his dagger. It struggled, bleeding for a few moments until it finally died, staying still in the red water.
Badma pulled up the fish, using the dagger to remove the tough scales while Shengdey went to gather some wood. They lit up a fire and cooked the fish there and shared it between them, complaining how there was no seasoning. They smiled as they watched Chengkil gobble up the scraps hungrily.
"Soon we'll find a town and get honest work," Shengdey said while watching Chengkil. "Then we can afford better food." Shengdey said as he put blankets on the grass, setting up for the night. "Then finally we can enjoy ourselves, my dear wife."

"Wife!?" She blushed and gasped as she crawled up to him under the blankets. "Okay, I'll bear with you for now." She said as she closed her eyes.
When dawn came, the girl opened her eyes slowly, still feeling drowsy. In her hands, she felt a small, hard, round object. Looking down, she saw it was a pearl. She reached for her neck and there was no necklace there anymore. She sat up with a start and every pearl that was on her necklace lay messily strewn across the blankets. And the silver flower was gone. She turned her head and gasped as she saw there was nobody there. She got up and almost vomited what she before her.
A dog's body lay lifeless on the grass. Its light grey fur was all ruffled and it was streaked all over with blood. It had no head.
Badma wasted no time; she got up and ran for home. She did not care about the bitter wind cutting at her body as she ran. She just wanted to see her family, her house, anything familiar to her. When she finally reached her village, she realised she was alone. Shengdey was not with her.
"What's wrong with you, child? You could have died!" Her mother scolded her as her daughter hugged her tightly, tears streaming down her face.
"What happened to... to my future husband?!" She wept.
The mother sighed, just holding her daughter. "Give up on him. That part of your life is past."
Nobody ever saw the boy or the dog again. A year later, some people came across the place where the young couple had slept. The river had changed direction. Instead of a straight stream, it was winding and twisting in the direction of the burnt forest, disappearing into the swamp like a huge snake. Silver pearls lay strewn all along the path. The water of the river had the colour of blood, overflowing with the half-eaten bodies of dead fish. It looked just like liquid garnet. And from the dead bodies of the fish, sprouted silver lotuses, lighting the entire river as far as the eye could see.
A pile of stones was erected on that scene and decorated with the silver jewellery. After that day, one day every year, the river would bloom silver lotuses and be overflowing with liquid garnet. Nobody entered the burnt forest though, knowing to respect the place.

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