

POETRY

Death

YASIF FAYSAL

It is so cheap like it is everywhere— on the highways, under the bridges, disappeared at the bottom of lakes, floating on water, forsaken by nearest ones, from tree hanging upside down needed by no one, grounded in mud licked by dogs, sent away by doctors, wrapped in white, slapdash, no ritual, collapsed open in marketplaces eyed by curious ones, stabbed in the dark found perfectly in two-piece beside railway track, taken away from home dumped anonymous, from heaven lightning sudden onto the sheltering trees, with fire charred like coal in profit factories, from neighbour's place the noise of mourning like the slow smoke from chimney,

in all places, may be now or tomorrow happening...

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Fireworks

BIPASHA HAQUE

Nobody tells me to search for you as if there's a timeframe for undertaking such quests! My voice sounds like yours, and often, looking at my arms, I get puzzled, I feel like these are your arms, but let's not talk about these now.

So, let me tell you what happened after you were gone. No one ever in their wildest dreams imagined that you'd depart, you're in a great rush, weren't you? (once you told me) You wanted to visit me riding the foamy peaks of ocean waves when in heavy monsoon fragrant *kaminis* blossom in abundance.

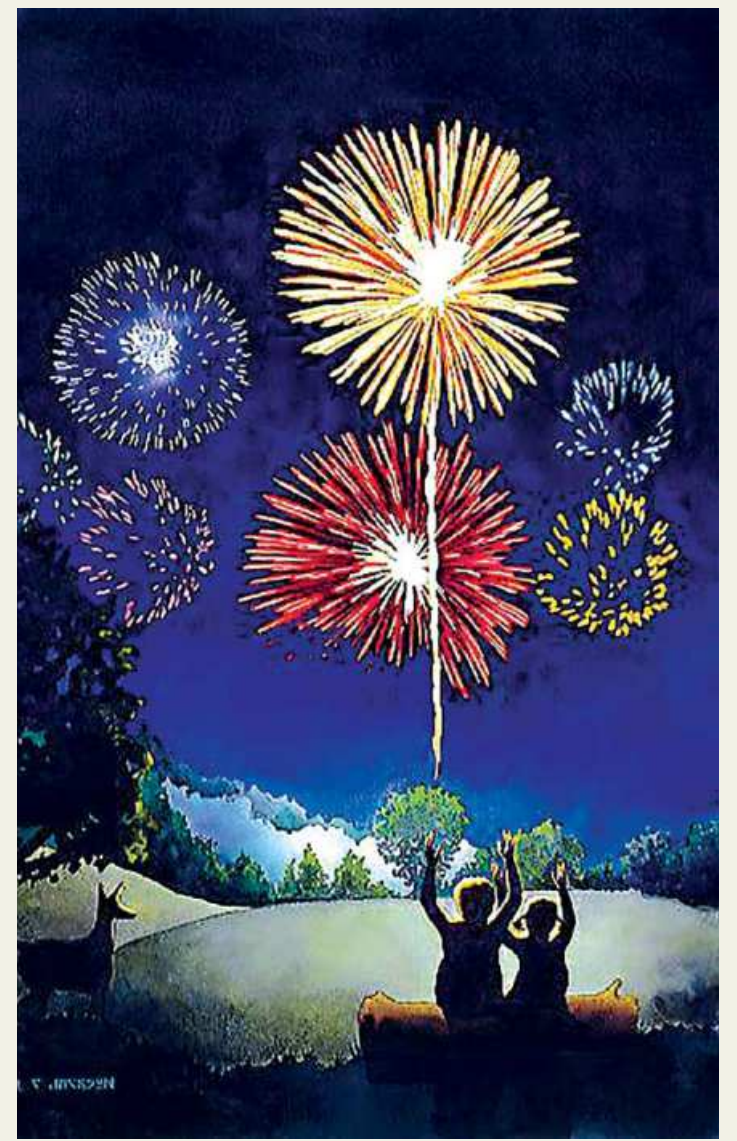
And, after that, so much monsoonal tide transformed into *hemanta* day hays. I don't feel courageous to post ads in newspapers captioning "Missing person"

How on earth would I compose the text? My feeble language gets distorted... I just have one language to touch you, and the language drags me at the beginning of *Magh* when egg-yolk hued days get smaller and smaller, and a bosom-full of mist, touching the tips of bamboo shoots drip drops, they dry, and settle onto a pool on your grave.

The wintry forest, as it touches you, swears by constellations that they'll move to the furthest south, and on wobbly knees, come to my shore. In the meanwhile, your pastures will be cold and numb at the *Maghi purnima's* harrowing chill.

And I? I will come knock on your door, begging for warmth in my freezing rapturous hibernation.

Bipasha Haque is a diaspora writer with particular interest in life-the way it is. By profession she is a university teacher.



FICTION

The Great Trojan Horse of Our Time

TANVIR MALIK

Zahid sat in a tiny room cramped with men. A ventilator was the only source for its occupants to get air from the outer world. The last time he had talked to his father had been at the Istanbul Airport. He still had his cellphone from Bangladesh. It was the only physical connection he had with his country.

"Who wants to go to the bathroom?" Mohammad opened the padlock with the key only he possessed.

Sounds of gunfire were a common occurrence here. Rebels were fighting the government, Mohammad had said. The roaring of waves reached Zahid's ears. It reminded him of Cox's Bazar.

Government Sujat Ali College, from where they had passed their HSC Exams. Before starting for Italy, Debashish had exacted a promise that Zahid would join him in Rome soon to start a business together in the city.

"Debu" had made it big in Rome and sent his family money every month. He sent Zahid the agent's full address and kept egging his friend via social media.

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to sleep. Each was immersed in his reveries. If dreams hadn't been so sweet, nobody would have exchanged his cozy bed at home for the potholed floor here. Dreams were the best, dreams were the worst. Dreams were bizarre.

The 'boat' was prepared for the voyage, blessed by God. Lots were cast to choose the lucky few. In the filthy belly of the beast, unarmed warriors crammed like maggots.

Danjuma, whose lot hadn't won, rushed out of the house. "Don't trust the sea, brothers!" he said, "Whatever it is, I fear the other side of the waves, even though that may promise paradise."

The adventurers turned a deaf ear. The dinghy left the shore. The tiny craft could hold fifteen people at best; nevertheless, double that number were squeezed in. The night sky was glittery with numerous stars. They were supposed to reach Sicily in about three days.

The eastern horizon became awash with an orange luminescence. A shooting star sped up the sky. Zahid dozed off, weaving the wefts and warps of his dreams.

The wind had picked up by mid-day. Suddenly, a splash sounded at the rear. Someone had fallen over the side.

A roll of lamentation went up. "My brother... O Allah!" Tamim sobbed. Waves had flailed Taufiq far behind the dinghy. His raised palm appeared faintly over the trail of foam. Everyone looked back.

Plp! Tamim dove in. The men looked back over their shoulders but snapped back like automatons.

The sapphire stretches of the Mediterranean lay unfurled before the adventurers. They heard no sirens to distract them, though, and their rubber dinghy had no masts to tie themselves to when the craft rocked violently. The Phoenicians had had plenty of potable water and wine with them to have had any clue about the parched throats afflicting the migrants. The Romans hadn't had to taste salty sea water while heading back home, after ploughing salt into the fields of a butchered city.

The sea became unusually calm on the last night. Hunger and thirst ruled under the grey sky. Two men -- running a high fever -- let out indistinguishable mutters. Three more men had fallen overboard during the day. They were given up as collateral. Nobody talked: two days' dehydration had taken its toll. Zahid lay looking up at the sky. He barely managed to fold his hands

under his head. The next day they were supposed to reach Lampedusa. He wondered how he'd contact Debu. He lived in Rome, didn't he?

Zahid woke up to a beautiful morning. The surface of the sea was calm. The dinghy was moving at a steady speed. Most of the men were slouched -- angry, bug-eyed and scruffy. The craft reeked of desperation and piss.

Retch, retch! The guy next to Zahid threw up all over him.

"O my God, yuck!" He tried to get away, but the bodies around him did not allow him to move. Unable, he had to take in the acrid smell. It mixed with urine and took on an outlandish odour of its own. His insides churned. Retch, retch! Frothy spit dribbled out.

The sea became choppy in the evening. The waves heaved and plunged, and the raft did their bidding.

"Land, land!" somebody shouted. It was indeed land. A faint glow appeared far in the distance. Zahid tried to smile, but his tongue felt like sandpaper, scraping against the dry walls of his mouth. He propped himself up a little.

Some had stood up. They were praying with open arms. "Sit down for God's sake," Abraham said, "we're not quite there yet."

A high wave beat against the boat and it careened. The praying men stampeded and that made the dinghy overturn. Everyone was thrown overboard.

The men floundered. Even in the month of June, the water was cold. "Swim, brothers, swim. It's very near now," Karim urged.

Zahid's whole body was numb. He strained his limbs, but they were not obliging. Several swam past him. His body felt like lead.

"Hel-lo, this is the Italian coast guards. Stay where you are. We're here." The searchlight of the rescue boat fell directly over Zahid.

A lifebuoy was flung. "Benvenuti in Italia!"

"Huh?" "Welcome to Italy," the coastguard sniggered. "You're under arrest."

'The Trojan Horse' was ready to take over Europe.

Tanvir Malik was born and raised in Dhaka. His first book is a collection of short stories called *Short Takes: Stories from Bangladesh*. A teacher by profession, he enjoys reading, travelling, and browsing the internet. He currently lives in Toronto, Canada.



The men came from a host of countries. There were two Bangladeshi brothers called Tamim and Taufiq from Chittagong. Taufiq was newly married. Danjuma was a poet from Nigeria. Karim, a devout Muslim from Egypt who said his prayers five times a day. Abraham was a Christian from Ethiopia; he talked about the glory of the church in his country being over fifteen hundred years old.

The Gumti cut through Dewidwar. It was said that one who tasted its famous sweets, had to come back for more. Grandparents still regaled their grandchildren with stories about khadi fabric, which even the Mughal Emperors appreciated. Zahid and Debashish had gone to

Zahid went to Dhaka to meet the agent. His office was very impressive with a huge fish tank labelled "The Mediterranean," where fish of every kind swam around. The lovely receptionist showed Zahid into the managing director's air-conditioned office. He wore a navy-blue suit and cut a dashing figure. The English sentences that punctuated his speech sounded impeccable.

"Don't worry, young man, everything will be taken care of. My men will receive you in Istanbul and Tripoli. You'll be put up in a three-star hotel and then a yacht will take you to Italy," he smiled.

Zahid and two other Bangladeshi men started their journey from the Chittagong International Airport. At Istanbul an agent named Gianni joined them with five more migrants -- all

Eritrean. Mohammad took over in Tripoli. He hugged all the migrants and then urged them to pile into an ancient taxi cab the front doors of which didn't close, and the rear ones were fastened by a curious contrivance of ropes. On their way to the "hotel," the three-star treatment began.

The house was by the beach on an isolated edge of Tripoli. It was abandoned and war-ravaged. The front walls were riddled with bullet holes. The two front pillars still stood and the passage between them led into the murky inside.

Mohammad came into the room to collect passports shortly after the group's arrival. "This is to ensure your documents' safekeeping. In your care anything could happen to them. I'll keep them safe," he added.

"But nobody told us you'd keep them," somebody said. "Like I said, this is for your safety -- nothing else. Do you still want to go to Italy or not?" Everybody nodded.

Days passed lazily. The meals were a scant, two-time affair per day. Drinking water outside meal hours was a luxury.

There was a torture chamber. Those who wouldn't pay up, were shackled, and whipped there. A man was taken from the room once, and he never came back. One night Zahid thought he heard groaning.

When the lights went out at 10 pm, the constant roaring of the sea took over. The sea, Zahid thought, could make or break his life.

On the eve of the adventure, Mohammad proclaimed, "Tomorrow before dawn you will board the boat." He surveyed the faces closely. "We don't have space for everyone. Lots will be cast."

Everybody clamoured for a space. "Shut up! I said only the ones who'll win the lots will be there," Mohammad growled.

Silence fell, and everybody lay down