

THE DEFINITIVE
YOUTH
MAGAZINE

SHOUT

DHAKA THURSDAY JULY 28, 2022, SRABAN 13, 1429 BS

A PUBLICATION OF *The Daily Star*



BORDERLINE
PG 4

A MARKED GRAVE
PG 7



fictitious

1. not real or true, imaginary or fabricated
2. occurring in or invented for fiction

VOLUME 3

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

EDITORIAL

At some point within the last year, we decided to open a separate email account for fiction submissions to SHOUT. It was a decision dictated by the volume of stories and poems readers send us every day, but also based on the belief that we need to appropriate a fixed, adequate amount of attention to those who have shown their vulnerable selves to us. That is how I have come to look at fiction writers – daring individuals who are ready to use their words to bare their souls to the world, and we here at SHOUT mean to respect that.

Fictitious, SHOUT's annual fiction-only issue, is a nod to young fiction writers. The stories young people want to tell the world often reflect society's ignored but looming issues. This week's SHOUT, with stories and poems exploring feelings of fear, of being stuck, of introspection of the person and the collective, does a pretty good job of this. With imagery ranging from the abstract to the extravagant, we intend to deliver a journey across a range of emotions contained within the humble bounds of eight pages. We hope we have succeeded.

– Azmin Azran, Sub-editor, SHOUT



TITLE
OF YOUR
MIXTAPE



A
 Jumpsuit
 twenty one pilots

No Surprises
 Radiohead

E Hawa
 Meghdol

Somebody That I Used
 To Know
 Gotye

B
 Girlfriend In A Coma
 The Smiths

Sunshine
 Steve Lacy ft. Fousheé

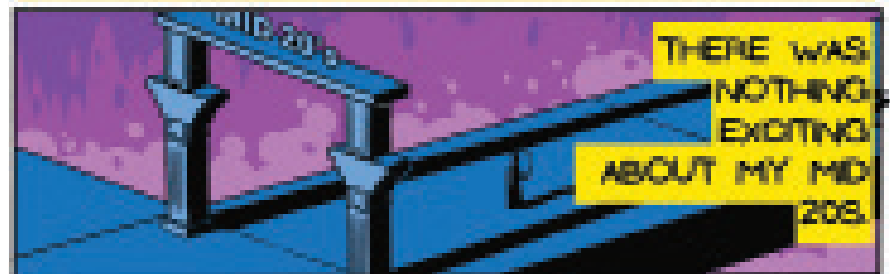
False Confidence
 Noah Kahan

I Forgot That You
 Existed
 Taylor Swift

Email us at shoutds@gmail.com
 with feedback, comments, and reader
 submissions within 500 words.

FATE MID-20S

A COMIC BY
 JUNAD KOBAL
 ISHAM



Only The Vultures

HASIB UR RASHID IFTI

"I'm not ready for a world without you, Sabrina," Fatima sobbed as she held her sister's hands trembling in debility and fear. Fear of dying and leaving her sister behind in this sordid place called home.

"We're never ready, Fatima," muttered Sabrina, staring at the soot on the ceiling. She was supposed to mop the ceiling last week. If Habib's mother notices, she'll make sure Habib hears about it when he comes home. About how Sabrina's not been working as much lately, how she forgot to bring Maa her medicine yesterday and how she's using her sickness as an excuse. Habib's going to make sure Sabrina remembers, if not for the curses, then for the scars he's going to leave behind. On her chest, her breasts and her thighs. But never on her face.

"My little dove, I won't leave you

behind," smiled Sabrina as she turned towards her sister, "I have a secret I want to share with you."

Fatima noticed a crackling flame in Sabrina's glittering eyes. Scared, she sat on her knees, "What is it?"

"I've been taking it all in, Fatima. Every night for the past 13 years. The howls, the scars, the filth. This was before Abba Amma died and I brought you here. The first few months – I would scream, fight and cry while the world turned deaf. I could see Abba and Amma stare at me while Habib gnawed my flesh out," Sabrina sobbed, "And they'd smile, Fatima! They'd stand in a corner and smile. That's when I stopped screaming and crying. I just kept my eyes closed until their smiles disappeared."

"I can't leave you here, my Jaan," Sabrina cupped Fatima's cheek, "When they're done with my janaza, I want you to come

back to my room. Right under this bed behind the blankets, you'll find a black jar with a yellow flower painted on the lid. Open it and promise me Fatima, you won't close the lid no matter."

"I promise, Apa," Fatima sobbed.

Sabrina's Janaza was completed in secret after Maghrib. Habib's mother didn't want a commotion.

Fatima went to Sabrina's room later that night. She found the black jar with a yellow flower on the lid. Fatima stepped back as the jar dropped off of her hand, wobbling unsteadily on its own. Hesitantly, Fatima knelt down and tried to open the jar. Branches and leaves from the flower grabbed Fatima's hand and wrapped her wrist all around. As the thorns on the branches pierced through her flesh, Fatima clenched her teeth and forced open the lid.

A sharp screech pushed her across

the room. Smoke gushed out of the jar as Fatima could see her sister's rotten corpse, shrieking as it kept disintegrating. Fatima could see cracks on the walls as the roof started collapsing. The branches and leaves on her hands kept spreading out across Fatima's entire body until they wrapped her around like cocoon wraps a moth and Fatima could see no more.

Covered in debris, Fatima woke up. The entire neighbourhood collapsed to rubble. As far as her eyes could see, it was annihilation. Rising from the ruins, Fatima saw her sister standing in the distance.

"Is everyone dead, Apa?" Fatima's voice quavered.

"Only the vultures, my Jaan," Sabrina smiled back.

Remind Ifti to be quieter at hasiburrashidifti@gmail.com

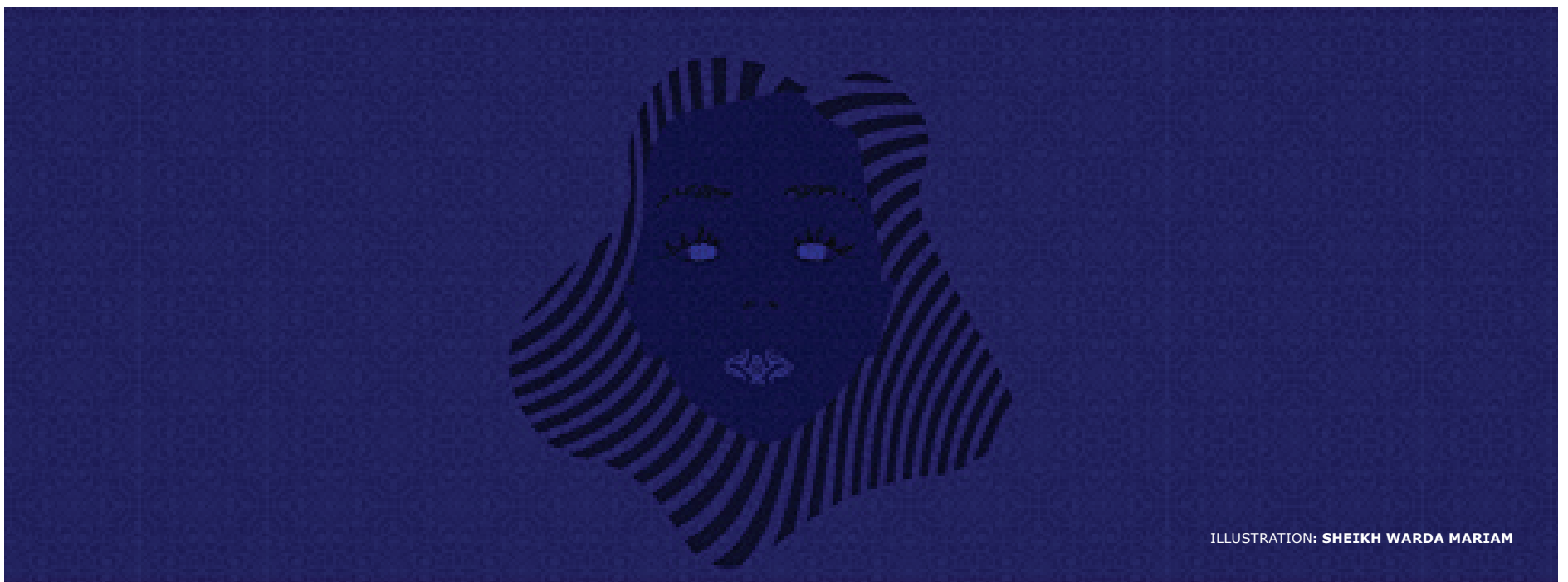


ILLUSTRATION: SHEIKH WARDA MARIAM

Product Placement Gone Wrong

ADHORA AHMED

Strip malls might lure someone in with those giant signs and billboards that glow neon after dark. But under the guise of various consumer goods, they offer nothing but the utmost form of blandness. Their air is choked thick with the diesel from all the parked cars crammed in the parking lot. People flock in and out of the automatic doors, carrying groceries or takeout or whatever. I myself have had to stop at one of these capitalist wastelands hundreds of times to grab something or the other. Strip malls are such an intrinsic part of mundane life here, but even after all these years, the sight of one never fails to depress me.

The strange twisting and turning of the car wakes me from my slumber. It's only Rina trying to find a spot to park at yet another strip mall. This might be our eighth or seventy-sixth stop since the beginning

of our road trip. By now, even she understands why I feel a bout of nothingness when it comes to these places.

"I get it," she said on only the third day. "They all look the same. Like suburbs."

"We didn't run out of gas, did we?" I ask Rina once we're parked.

"Not yet, we still have plenty to last the rest of the night. I just wanted a break."

She points her chin forward. "Do you want to go to that McDonald's?"

That big, yellow M is instantly recognizable, but something is odd.

"But that's not McDonald's. It's Mac-Donwald's. Must be a knock-off."

"What?" Rina chuckles, gets out of the car. "Come on, let's get you a coffee."

Maybe she's right. I'm too sleep-addled to think straight. McDonald's wouldn't let just anyone set up a knock-off without suing them for millions of dollars.

I get myself a black coffee because I promised to take the wheel after midnight, so I have to stay awake. Rina orders a Big Mac. She asks if I'm sure I don't want anything, even a small pack of fries. I'm not hungry, so I decline. My tastebuds have deteriorated to the point where I can't differentiate the taste of a fried chicken from a pizza, not even when my stomach growls. The brand names might be different, but all fast food tastes the same to me.

When Rina brings the tray to our table, however, my brain gets muddled further. My coffee cup does not bear the McDonald's logo, but that of "Munchkin Go-nuts". The typeface and colour scheme is the same as that of Dunkin' Donuts. I look at Rina, who appears completely nonplussed as she takes out her burger from a "Clubday" wrapper, which has Subway's exact green, yellow, and white lettering.

My gaze drifts to the cashier at the counter. He wears a red uniform. Everything seems fine for a moment, until I spot the logo on the menu display board above him. A long-haired mermaid with a crown, smiling down at us. Starbucks. But wait, the writing underneath the logo says Barf.

"Hey, your coffee's running cold."

I look back at Rina and consider asking if she can see what I see. Just then, a grinning waitress appears at our table, asking if everything is alright.

"Yes, b-but isn't this a McDonald's?"

"Sir, this is a Bhendy's."

Please do not contact Adhora Ahmed. Even better, do not perceive her. For practical purposes, Adhora does not exist.

Borderline

I draw a small, perfect circle with a stub of a white chalk and place my cat, Scimp (whom I had found as a stray here) inside it.

MAISHA NAZIFA KAMAL

Scimp looks skeptically at me, gracing the air with a quiet mewl but keeps on sitting in her place.

A wash of unidentified sadness is all it needs for me to take my eyes off the white, ominous circle with Scimp inside and walk to the edge. Above, the stars have breathed into the sky in a dust of colors and grains. I feel lost just staring up at them as I always do, like my soul detaches itself from my body and flies up to the world above. Except after racing and twirling in the sky above, it plunges deep down into the world below.

The world underwater which I can never see from up here, the world in mid-sky.

It's been years since the people of the earth were divided, where they were given the choice to live either quite literally underwater, called Marina or in the floating world in the sky called, Ciela. The word "choice" was an overstatement, however. Some were given the choice, others were forced. I, as a citizen of a country that was taken onboard among the last ones, was faced with the latter. I was stationed at Ciela, a huge floating bubble-like world in mid-sky that had its customized oxygen in the air.

And my wife was stationed at the Marina, the twin world of Ciela but only under water.

The world leaders had for long fought hard to have one world where we would take refuge in when everyone realized that our planet is definitely going through changes that we won't be able to survive. But after a lot of debate about where to escape, above or below, someone had finally laid out the cunning plan of having both. There would be lesser accommodation problems, more advantages. The leaders spun this into an idea of "revolutionizing", "futuristic living" and the media ate it up as "the perfect plan". Except it would cost a lot.

And it did. And they are now trying to compensate that with our labour, forced into work in equality in both worlds. *Marina and Ciela would have equal number of children* – the leaders crooned. But they didn't tell us what kind of mothers separated their children into two polar opposite worlds where they could never meet.

However, amidst Marina and Ciela, was another world as my soul flitted past it. The earth. The middle ground. The world we left behind.

It was barren there. After constant episodes of wildfire, tsunamis and earthquakes, the earth swallowed itself up until there were no trees, no stable ground without a fissure, no air that wasn't heavy with smoke and toxins. And of course, no humans.

My wife and I wrote to each other at first, breezy and hopeful, pretending it was just some work that took us apart for the time being. But two years in, the wounds and dents settled in. Couples from richer, more powerful countries had not been separated, it was just people like us who had to work like this. Not that

there was no rule to meet. There was a sparing rule to meet once every year or so but we never made to the cut.

I re-read my wife's latest text that I got a while ago:

"Hi. You know, my brain's quite infested with this amusing thought every time I have

version of the sky we see. It's just rippling reflections, honestly. Sigh. Take care of yourself and Scimp. Love you."

She sent a picture of herself holding up a plate of shrimp and scrunching her nose at it. Because they live underwater, they are constantly bathed in this blue hue that seeps in no matter how many artificial



ILLUSTRATION: MUHTASIM HAQUE NAHIAN

some seafood: now that I am living in this curious world of water, I feel like a cannibal every time I have one. Because I feel more like a marine creature and less like a human these days. Haha. Isn't it weird? Anyway, how are you holding up? Spotted any new nebula? I have been briefly missing the sky, really. Here, I'm very much annoyed by the watered-down

lights they've installed there. Today, it's bluer. It's like this blue has invaded her too. And that makes my soul return inside me and shrink in agony too.

I take pictures of the sky for my wife since she misses them and glance at Scimp again, who's nestled in deep sleep inside the circle I drew. She doesn't even

have a fur on the borders. What a wicked cat – I find myself thinking. The sirens go off and before I can dwell on the circle any longer, I drag myself back to work again.

But at work today, it's different.

There's something else in the air today beside the ever-present sterile scent. Something delicious and not as suffocating like the always-being-diffused disinfectants:

Excitement.

People are huddled here together as they most probably are going through the same thing in their phones. I open mine too and find it.

A small blue dot of the most recent news:

It has been found through concrete evidences that there are still some humans surviving on the land. The Middle Ground – people called.

I gasp. *But how?* – I wonder. From up here in Ciela, the land looks so haunted, like part of some dystopia and not the other way around. How did they manage to survive there or not be forced into either Marina or Ciela there?

The leaders bring up this news in their speeches, stating that fools do live in this thriving age of intelligence. They try to paint these humans as some outlaws (which they technically are), evil aliens who are serving punishment there and not defying the higher powers.

But I and the rest see it for what it is. The bones of Marina and Ciela were rattled with the news, the powers that be were challenged. This was historical.

And I somehow think of our old life there. Images of a small but cosy house, white walls, sugar quills and large open windows, cobblestoned roads and beautiful green plants that my wife loved, flash through my mind.

I feel more like a marine creature and less like a human these days. But she wasn't.

And neither was I a bird in a sky.

I stare down at the floor. Our floors are quite transparent and you can see everything that's below. The world looks too small from up here and maybe it's my imagination but it seems today a bit more liveable than I last saw. It suddenly occurs to me that those humans on the land are the ones surviving, living even and we are the ones out here who escaped.

Not a marine creature, not an aerial one, we're just humans.

I think of my wife, how she loved our life before; her eyes always full of some sort of emotion all the time. But without the Marina and Ciela where would we have gone?

The answer is quite simple as Scimp suddenly with a loud purr, steps out of her circle. Elaborately she walked out and stood in between the circle and me.

The borderlines have been smudged off.

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

LOS

UPOMA AZIZ

When Naf woke up, he didn't have much expectations from the day. He never did, and secretly hoped that the day didn't have anything to ask from him either, so they'd be even.

He looked at his un-watered, shrivelling plants on the windowsill, at the dust settling on his untouched books, on the apple from three months ago, which surprisingly, looked pretty much the same.

"What a beautiful day," he said out to himself.

He rolled out of his bed, on his way to have a very productive least of the day. He loitered into the kitchen and peeked into the fridge which was pretty empty last night, and clearly hadn't acquired any new food by itself overnight.

He then decided that the best way to be productive would be to cook something for himself. He pulled up a few recipes that claimed to be two-ingredient, then quickly realized he didn't have truffle oil or Worcestershire sauce.

"Khichuri it is," he declared to himself.

After he washed and put the rice in the water, an ungodly amount of turmeric, and whatever spices he found around the house, he discovered there was no lentil either. Just as he was torn between giving up altogether and giving himself a pep talk on how some cultures genuinely had yellow rice in their cuisine, the bell rang.

After he was glad at this distraction from his ongoing culinary crisis, and he opened the door without peeking. It was the most beautiful man he'd ever seen, in the most dreadfully coloured uniform.

"Hello! I am here to check on the pipes?" the man smiled. His teeth gleamed like pearls, and Naf stood bedazzled for a while, before inviting the man in.

The man showed himself to the washroom. Strangely, Naf could faintly hear a flute melody. He felt soporific, till he smelt something burnt, and dashed to the kitchen to salvage his now yellow and black rice.

"Are you done?" he asked the man who was in the living room now, "Do I have to pay you or will the landlord do it?"

When the man looked back at Naf, his eyes were a faint grey. Naf was perplexed, he was sure they weren't the same half an hour ago.

"Sit down," the man told him calmly,

but with such authority, Naf didn't even question why he was being ordered around in his own house.

"So," the man intertwined his long, ivory fingers, "I have an offer for you."

"What? I thought you were here to check the pipes?" Naf managed to croak.

"Oh yes, that," the man took a small instrument from his pocket, a number of reeds of different sizes bound together. "The pipes work fine, I checked, see?" the man blew on the instrument and produced a cheery melody.

The man leaned back in Naf's chair designated for his clothes too dirty to wear, too clean to wash. The heap of clothes was nowhere to be seen. "How would you like to be immortal?"

He snapped out of his trance and asked, "Sorry, what?"

The man stared at Naf and he felt himself breaking into a cold sweat – he felt as if he had no secrets any more, that the man had travelled to the space between his cells and through his bloodstream. All his insecurities, his failures, his make-believe cheery disposition were all known to the him. Naf had never felt so bare in his life.

The man was the one to break eye contact first. Naf shifted in his seat uncomfortably. Who was this man? He felt cold chills in the Mid-July inferno.

"Never mind, how—" the man produced a grey ball of wool out of thin air, "Would you like to have a new roommate?"

Naf stared. The grey ball of wool meowed.

"Look, I don't know who you are or what you want, and why you want me to keep a cat, I'm not a cat person," the grey kitten peeked through the man's fingers, it had huge blue eyes that shone like lapis lazuli. "I'm barely even an animal person. I can't take care of myself, I don't know what I'm doing with my life, or where I'm

headed. It all just is too much for me, and—" Naf didn't know why he was telling all of this to the fake plumber, but he did feel better as he did, "I don't know if I'm capable of taking care of another life form."

"Oh, don't worry. It's only for a week.

This creature doesn't have very long to live," the man opened his palm and the kitten jumped onto the floor. Naf couldn't take its eyes off the cat at it continued to do regular cat things. "My initial offer still stands. I'll be here to collect the cat a week later, so, you can tell me if you've changed your mind then. Oh, and, the cat's name is Los."

And with that, the man was gone. * * *

Naf couldn't stop pacing. The door was left wide open. Los snuggled up against his leg. Naf picked him up and kissed the top of his head.

It had been a week and Naf was utterly, and completely in love with this cat. He would fight the strange man if needed, but he couldn't let Los go.

"I see you have grown quite fond of him," Naf jumped, and saw the man standing in the doorway.

Naf could feel his throat closing in, "You can't have him."

The man's smile didn't falter, "Why?" he asked.

"What if—" Naf wet his lips, "What if I choose to pass on your offer to Los?"

"I'm afraid that's not possible. Unless you choose to accept, then the immortal and the mortal can share on the unending life. But," the man held up a finger, "The price is half of your soul. You and the cat will share your immortality, and a soul."

"I'm not so sure I want the immortality, I'm not the most optimistic person out there. I'm not even sure I want to live forever," Naf shrugged.

"Would you prefer that your companion walks the earth alone after you pass away?" the man asked.

The thought of Los mewling around the streets all alone had Naf devastated. "No," he said flatly.

"Then, do you accept?" the man asked.

"I accept," Naf said.

"Great then, it is done." The man rose from his seat. Naf didn't feel too different. "Though it wasn't much of a choice for you—" the man said walking out of the door.

"Why do you say that?" Naf asked.

The man turned to face Naf. "You didn't choose Los. Los chose you to be his companion for eternity. The immortality has been exchanged between the mortal, and the immortal," the man pointed at Los. "I was here only to make the offer on behalf of the ancient deity. Los meowed loudly. "The deity wants treats" the man pointed helpfully, and disappeared.

Upoma Aziz is a slouching, crouching, grouchy Goblin with a hoarding problem. Tell her to declutter her desk and her mind at upoma.aziz@gmail.com



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

UNTOLD

FATIMA AHMAD

They say I'm a new person everyday
 How do I explain to them that I am Azrael?

I keep killing versions of me
 I have killed so many of them that I've lost
 count

Sometimes I strangle them to death
 Sometimes my knife stabs them in the chest
 Sometimes I push them down into the ocean
 Sometimes I let cyanide consume them from
 within

Their screams deafen my ears
 Their eyes engulf my mind

Look, my hands are red with blood!

They say I'm a new person everyday
 How do I explain to them that I am Jesus
 too?

I keep resurrecting versions of me
 Exhume the bodies lying under dust and dirt

Take them home
 Scrub them clean, cook them meals
 I embellish them with jewellery
 and extricate them from misery

Their giggles fill the room
 Their eyes moist with gratitude

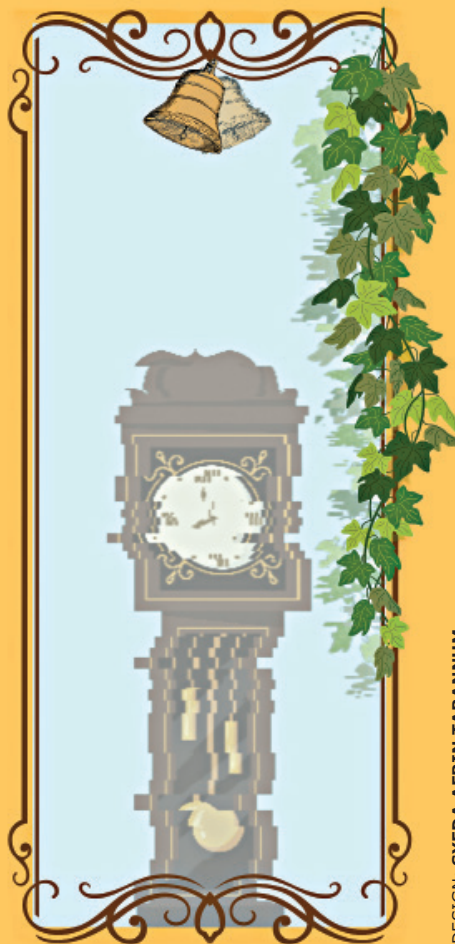
Look, my hands are clean again!

"You are a new person every day," they say
 Only if they knew what it takes to be a new
 person every day.

*The writer is a student of 11th grade at SOS
 Hermann Gmeiner College Dhaka.*



DESIGN: **FATIMA JAHAN ENA**



DESIGN: **SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM**

The mirror across my bed says otherwise

A. M. FAHAD

I'm here, but I'm not
 Scribbled lines across my forehead
 This thought I tried really hard to remember,
 It appears to be elusive to the eye
 Always hides behind a curtain
 My arms,
 Outstretched still—
 I fail to clutch it with my very small hands
 I forget.

My body is filled with fog
 It spreads slowly, hissing
 And a melody, rather monotonous
 And repetitive,
 Like a pendulum.

Almost like the sound of church bells,
 And the lingering microphone screeches from
 Maghrib
 It stays for some time
 And my body is rendered to a state of hopeless
 rigidity

"Wake,"
 You call me
 I try really hard,
 But I cannot move.
 I see disappointment in your eyes
 Staring down upon me
 I don't know what to say
 I wish I could find an answer for you

I really thought that this time,
 I must have had everything planned.

*The writer is a student of class 11 at St Joseph
 Higher Secondary School.*

TWO POEMS

RAIHAN MUSA

Hope (I)

Hope is the raging fire of Elysium.
 Hope is the violent lightning of Thor.
 Hope is the blazing light of Amaterasu.
 Hope is the golden lyre of Orpheus.
 Hope is the wild spirit of Artemis.
 Hope is the beautiful dawn of Aurora.
 Hope is the majestic twilight of Melancholy.
 Hope is the virgin blood of Life.
 Hope is the holy nectar of Love!

Hope (II)

A dove with celestial wings,
 Illuminating the darkness in your soul.

A golden-haired Maiden with blue eyes,
 The north star of Heaven,
 Guiding you through treacherous waters!

The writer is an A Level graduate.



DESIGN: **SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM**

A Marked Grave

WAZIHA AZIZ

"Where the hell is Manzur?" Taher crouched near a slight bend, peeking over some dying shrubbery. "I said high noon."

They were half a dozen young boys, gathered on a hillside overlooking the graveyard near Battoli. Rays of light feasted on their charcoal skin as the sun splintered a clear sky in ways only winter could spawn. Green became a cool grey as plants succumbed to the heat. But the boys stood their ground, all awkward knees and elbows, as vigorous as ever in the world dying around them.

"You're one to talk," said Shahid, his cracked voice testing the waters of puberty. "Always skipping class for a puff... or worse."

A sudden chill crept up the boys' spines as a sharp smack cut through the air.

"Don't you dare talk back to me!" Taher's face grew red with anger.

"Damn you all! I just want to say a proper goodbye!" Shahid braced himself for a punch.

"Wait, guys!" the sight of their friend interrupted an otherwise inevitable brawl.

Manzur's slight frame running up the dirt path sent a sigh of relief through the group. He would not miss the burial after all.

"What's going on?" His voice tore through the violent haze.

"What's that?" asked Rakib, the only one not taken in by the fighting.

"This? I found it on Rahim mama," answered Manzur, gesturing to the leather-bound book he'd been carrying. "Hid it right before they took him away. And thank God I did."

"Why? What's in it?"

"No idea. We need our best reader."

"Sure, just hand it over."

This statement from Rakib sent another flare up Taher's cheeks.

"As the eldest, I get to read it," Taher claimed. Another fight was ensuing.

"Guys, I see people with shovels down there!"

"You're sure it's him?" asked Manzur, quietly handing Rakib the book.

"Yeah, Antor bhai said so. He's in there handling it right now." Taher's unrelenting eyes followed the exchange, but he said no more.

Rakib squinted at what looked like a messy scribble of diary entries. Placing his palm against the cracked spine, ran his fingers over the breaking edges of the crusty paper, the first of which seemed to be missing. The cover read in bold letters, "This Diary Belongs to *Rahim Chowdhury*"

The group fell into an uneven circle abandoning Taher's initial plan, as Rakib cleared his throat, slipping into a confident composure, just as his mama had taught him all those months ago.

The words spilled out of him like poetry. The others desperately held onto each syllable rolling off his tongue, cringing as each sound brushed past their earlobes, afraid of their mama's final breaths absorbing into everything. Turning into nothing.

"13th July 1986

Dear Diary,

I am a lost man, who finds himself

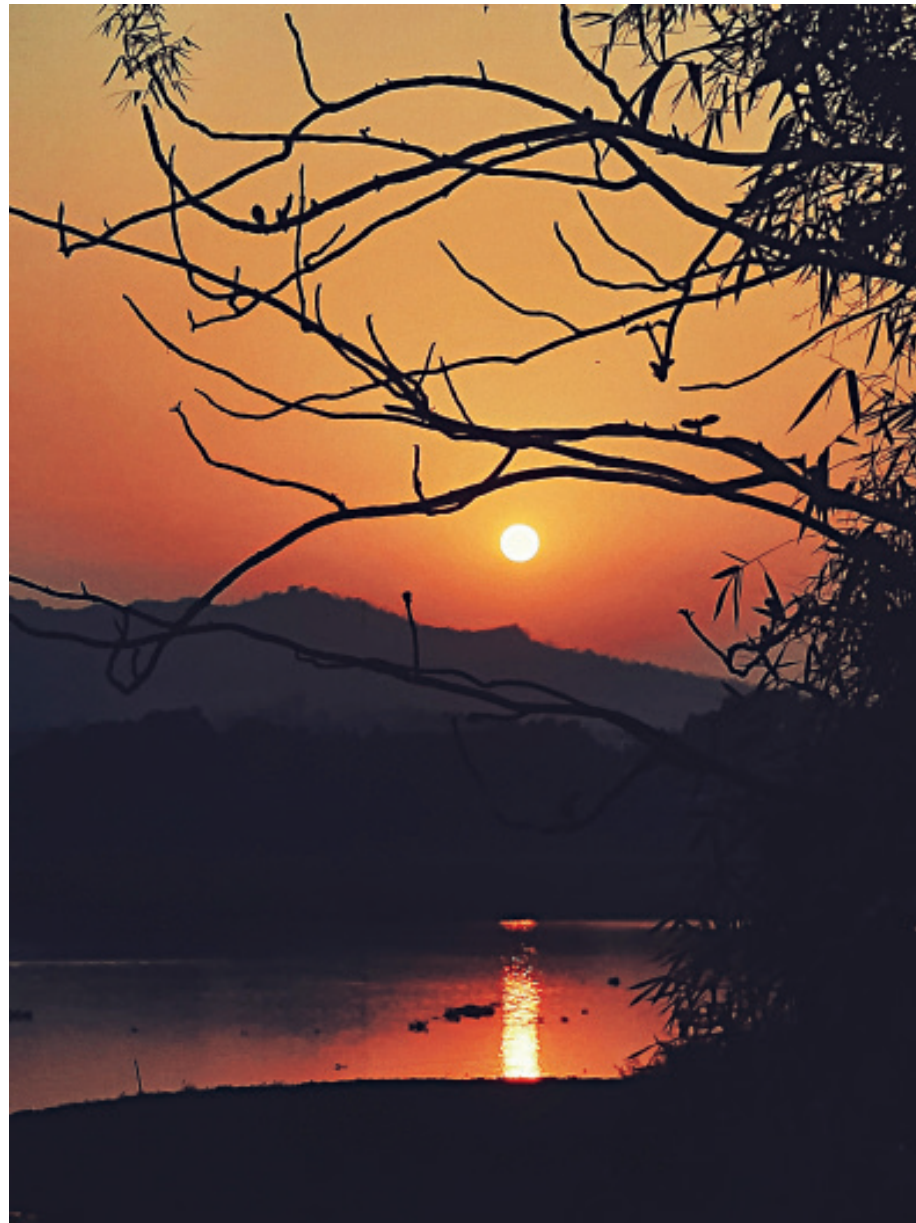


PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

coming in and out of consciousness, drifting in this dirt-poor station. It hasn't been long since I arrived here, yet already my back aches against the uneven pavement, my teeth stain from the persistent paan. I tried contacting my son in Tokyo but am still awaiting an answer.

20th July 1986

The running trains leave my head spinning. I watch people bid each other farewell, in a melee of waving hands and lost tears, the platform shakes like a shiver in the cold. Is it the train speeding away? Or is it me?

26th January 1987

Dear Diary,

Still no reply. I understand that he is busy with his family. I would send another message but am short on cash. Once the telegram reaches him, he can come get me. I'm not too old to at least help around the house.

30th September 1987 (approx.)

Dear Diary,

Who knew an eight-year-old could be so insufferable? I'd been noticing a few urchins recklessly boarding trains for a while now. Today, as was inevitable, one of the lot (named Morshed, I think, I can't be sure) got his wiry foot stuck between the steel steps, failing to somersault his way in. Thank the Lord I was nearby.

Grabbing him by the hips, I yanked him away from the edge. He looked up at me once I set him down and asked why he would take such risks.

"Arreh uncle," he answered in between chuckles bubbling over, "It was nothing!"

Fall 1989 (approx.)

Dear Diary,

I wonder what happened to the telegrams. Maybe my son changed his address.

Meanwhile, I've made myself a half-life here. Every morning I awake before sunrise, watch the first trains come by. Sleepy passengers make their way through the platform steering clear of my scattered belongings. Do they do it out of respect or disgust? Perhaps guilt.

The sun is up by the time Morshed and his friends are done ransacking compartments and selling their findings. That is when I gather the kids around, their notebooks in hand.

At first, it was tough without an adequate amount of interest on their part, much less pen and paper. But using their earnings for supplies has sped up our process. Now that the kids have discovered the power of words, they are well on their way to writing essays by themselves.

Rakib, the youngest of the lot, has grasped the patterns of this language sus-

piciously fast. But Manzur has a gift seen only in poets long dead. He finds meaning behind words that seemingly hide no secrets, writes as an artist to his muse, twists his words forming encryptions only those well versed in poetry can uncover.

I teach the kids letters, words, and sentences. They use them to tell vibrant stories born only from the free minds of children.

This I do twice a day. The rest of my time is spent watching, listening, and pondering. I now have a taste for jorda and solitude.

Winter, 1990 something, or maybe 2000

I have just scolded Taher for missing class again. It hurts to be so strict but I'm glad these boys agreed to learn the alphabet. They have become my responsibility. My lifeline.

I do not have much time left, I know. I can feel my frail bones breaking from the cold. But I have done more in this shallow unmarked grave, I have lived more in this half-life than ever before. Nobody will remember me. But as these kids write, my name is branded on the skin of this world, stitched into the tapestry of time itself.

They are my children. They will grow to achieve greatness and that will be my legacy.

Do not stand at my grave and weep.

I am not there.

I do not sleep."

At this point Rakib went quiet, staring glassy-eyed at the final entry.

"I want to give Rahim mama a proper burial," it was unclear who made this proposition, but the agreement was unanimous.

The sun set as six young boys – shirts tied over their heads, beads of sweat rolling down their pearlescent shoulder blades – gathered around a hole dug as deep as six young boys could manage. The youngest hugged a leather notebook to his bare chest.

Dense fog enveloped them as the hole was refilled, a makeshift tombstone placed at one end. "Here lies Rahim mama, a teacher and a father," the stone declared, an imposing interruption bathed in the glory of promise and possibility, resting on a doorway between worlds, on the otherwise barren hilltop.

A beacon home, a watered seed for Manzur, who would have his first published book by 20, Morshed who'd build a mini empire, using business savvy made obvious from his expert bartering of train goods and of course, Rakib, who would teach railway kids on weekends as his uncle had done long ago.

They headed back to the station, their home. Looking back at their mama's words absorbed into nothing, turned into everything one last time.

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Love is an **abstract** noun

AHMAD SALEH ABDULLAH

for SAP

What is love? Ask any ten-year old, she'll say
Love is an abstract noun wafting
Flawlessly on the page of a grammar book.
Noun. Abstract. That which cannot be touched.
But between holding hands and silent sobs
on wet shoulders,
Withered and faded petals in fragrant
letters,
Blood slowly soaks the page, flames slowly
turn
The pages yellow; the edges crumple.
Emotions gallop in through the sluice gates
of the sky.
And what remains is the memory of a lost
innocence,
The promise of eternity in your ring
With the past carved as diamond on top
of it.
When clouds array themselves in white
ribbons

And the dawn wraps itself around you,
Waves rise in the sea of time
And the abstract tide stops, falters, spills
Filling the room with a mercurial gloom.
The distance is what binds us. The empti-
ness.
Why are we as immiscible as the oceans?
Touching
At the borders yet never becoming one?
The tunnel stretches further the closer we
reach the light.

But *love* is an abstract noun, its ways
Unknown to our mere mortal hearts,
And through many a fateful turn
We become just another Troy ready to
burn.
Yet in its name we become martyrs.
And in words I dream
Of one kiss on one dying star.

*Abdullah lives in a world as Finnegans Wake
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PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Dr Aslan's Husband during a Telephone Call

ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

"Hello, Dr Aslan speaking... Oh! My dear Margot, whatever's the matter?"
Dr Aslan's husband carefully tucked away the sigh that was about to escape him as he watched his wife answer her patient. Giving her a small smile, he went back to his dinner. He was aware of the joy she derived from helping these troubled individuals. He could not begrudge her that.
"No, no, there is nothing for you to be sorry about, it's nothing... First, tell me what happened."
The daughter of working-class parents, his wife had struggled teeth and bone to acquire the position of a practising psychiatrist. He really was very proud of her. The late-night conversations about her patients they had in bed, both carrying a welcome exhaustion from their respective days — hers spent in her clinic and his running after their two girls — was one of the highlights of his humble life.
"I need you to take a few deep breaths. In and out, just like that."
If Dr Aslan's husband was asked what was the one quality of his wife that he admired the most, he would say it was her kindness. Day after day, she spent countless hours listening to the sufferings of her beloved dears.
"Y-you are having a panic attack... No, there is nothing wrong with you."
The few instances that he had seen her staring off into space, a strangely

blank expression on her face, could only be attributed to the burden she carried from her patients. This was also true for that one incident when he had found Dr Aslan in their dressing room, muttering *monsters* under her breath as she sobbed like he had never seen her sob before. Shocked, he had not known what to think of her sudden bitterness. But now he understood, it was only the rambling of a poor woman feeling sorry for the horrors her patients endured.
"I understand how you are feeling, my dear. You are overwhelmed, your

senses are overstimulated."

Yes, Dr Aslan's husband was married to an exceptional woman. Not only was she to be lauded in her professional sphere, her personal accomplishments were also great. Dr Aslan was, after all, a devoted wife and a caring mother.

"While I can't say the knife was a good idea... Oh no, believe me I am only trying to help."

Despite the fatigue she unquestionably felt after her hours spent at work, she never failed to spend time with her family at night — the night time

belonged to her family alone. Except for the occasional after-hours call she got from her patients. Like now.

"I suggest you not take any hasty steps and wait for the morning."

But her husband couldn't very well tell her not to take those calls. He didn't have any wish of doing so either.

"I really do hope you are sure."

It was true that in the afternoons, while standing in the kitchen preparing lunch for their children, Dr Aslan's husband sometimes let himself wonder what his life could have been like if he hadn't met her. He would probably have been unmarried, employed in a nine-to-five job working towards a retirement plan. But just as he thought he could hear the bustle of unsatisfied employees going about their day, he broke himself out of the reverie.

"Alright, I'll see you tomorrow."

Dr Aslan's husband looked towards his wife as she wrapped up her call and let lose the sigh that he had suppressed at the beginning. But he sighed not for her, nor her unfortunate dear. But for himself. Alas, he thought, Annushka has already spilled the oil.

Zaima wrote this as a nod to Mark Twain's 'A Telephonic Conversation' and Mikhail Bulgakov's 'The Master and Margarita'. Write to her at zaima2004adrita@gmail.com



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA