

FICTION

The Hangings at VICTORIA PARK



“Rise and shine, Subhedar Qureshi, rise and shine.” The gently mocking tone split the night to blinding day. Sharif smelled them before he saw them, not needing to open his eyes even fully to know what he would see. The house, the paltry yard, the remnants of the fire, Sharif’s money, still on the ground where he’d laid it at the old man’s feet, were surrounded by white faces, one of whom, the one with the morning’s greetings, held the rifle Sharif had dropped somewhere along the way.

NADEEM ZAMAN

Dhaka, 1857
If they’d been in Delhi or Meerut or Lucknow, maybe they’d see and hear a different story. If they’d fought at Kanpur they’d at least have had a chance to prove themselves. Here in Dhaka, inside this unfinished dream of a grieving father, another of the Mughal breed, all they could do was wait – wait to be disarmed, as word had had all hackles raised that British marines were on their way to take away their guns.
Of course that bastard Nawab Abdul Ghani sided with the British, of course he did. What else to expect from a line of thieves that let the British in to begin with. Royal charter. Trading firm. One clot of bandits making blood deals with another. The age-old order of things.
Sharif had been listening to a huddle of his comrades for the last endless hour, spinning the same few thoughts around and around like a thrashing, dying chicken. They’d called his name a few times to get him in on the nonsense, but he ignored them and closed his eyes. Their plans of doing this and doing that when they finally shed the Company’s uniform would be laughable if he didn’t actually pity them for it.
He’d drifted off. In a gauzy dream Usha came to him, beckoning. That was all *he* wanted, to answer her summons. Life would be complete. He’d left home to get away from the vipers of his squabbling clan. His brothers tearing at each other over square inches of land, their wives in a battle of their own hurling curses, spitting spells. Thank God, his parents were gone. Dead no doubt from anguish, but out of the fray, God-willing better off. Usha, the one, the only, his sole reason to make it out alive.
A roar, a train out of control, thunder barreling across the heavens, and he was pulled to his feet, barely getting purchase before he tumbled, and smacked against a snarling white face. The horde of them were here and up ahead a dust storm kicked up by scuffling boots and dragging bodies had the world obscured. Sharif was sure his dream of Usha had slipped into a nightmare choked with British marines,

that he wasn’t actually awake and stumbling around for balance while the marine barked and tussled with him. But he was wide awake, had gotten to his feet, had shouted back that he was not laying down arms. The huddle of fellow sepoys had done the same, defied orders to surrender and Sharif blind with sleep and fury had charged into the fray.
Looking him up and down the old farmer frowned.
“You ran here from Dhaka?”
“I’ve been running for days.”
“Why?”
“To get away from people.”
The old man may have rasped a laugh, it was impossible to tell, the sickness in his chest a sucking void. He’d not believed Sharif was who he said he was.
“Qureshi? *The* Qureshis? You? Looking like that?”
“I’m a sepoy.”
“I can see that. Which then? Qureshi or sepoy?”
“Both.”
“Go from here.” The farmer started closing the door.
From inside a boot Sharif produced a wad of cash.
“Are you trouble?”
“Only for myself. Please,” Sharif counted out enough to pay the farmer’s taxes for the year and the ones in arrears.
“You look thirsty,” the old man said.
Sharif watched him and a young boy that had appeared out of the miserable hut build a fire, sipping water from an earthen cup. The night was cool. Neither the farmer nor the boy had more than rags to keep them warm. The boy had eyed Sharif’s uniform several times with pupils brightly alert in a face that was dead before its time.
The farmer was the boy’s grandfather. The boy’s father, mother, and older brother had been killed by their landlord’s overseers. The old man and the boy were spared to keep on working, paying the taxes. Gnarled from shoulders to ankles, the old man often shook

with pain, and the boy could barely stand for lack of food.
Sharif held out the rest of the money, which the farmer noted but didn’t reach for. Sharif placed it at his feet.
The boy tugged at Sharif’s elbow. He led him to the darkness of the surrounding fields and pointed at the night.
“Okay, I’ll leave,” Sharif said.
“No,” the old man said. “That’s not it. He wants you to look.”
There was nothing but a starless, moonless sky and land unknown to him. The boy kept pointing, like a command to run.
“I see nothing.”
“They’re out there, under the soil. He wants you to know. His family.”
Appeased enough, the boy left Sharif and returned to the old man’s side and warmed his hands by the fire mirroring how the man held his.
“What is a rich man’s son doing in the Company’s army? Can’t think of a better way to die?”
“I didn’t want to be a rich man’s son.”
The old man stared at the fire, the fire glinting double in his tired but alert eyes. The same eyes as the boy’s.
“You’re landlords, you Qureshis.”
“Yes.”
“Big ones.”
Sharif said nothing.
“How do you treat your people like me?”
“We should do better.”

Later, after the man and boy were asleep, Sharif went the way the boy had pointed with a lantern. A breeze stroked the back of his neck, teased and threatened the lantern flame. Fifty or so feet later, Sharif stopped and made a circle with the light held above his head. He would think there would be some disturbance on the ground, earth interrupted, to indicate the graves. The lantern was pointless. The night was too fiercely dark to let it shine on all it hid.
When he walked back to the house he saw that he hadn’t gone that far, maybe a hundred yards. He killed the lantern and sat with his back against the house, looking out in the direction he had come from hours before.
He went in and out of sleep, the state of being in neither one nor the other bringing Usha and taking her away over and over, making him start awake each time and finding that she wasn’t there after all, that the veil had fallen again and again between the place of dreaming and the real.
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They called it a trial. There was a woman, the sole woman. None of the men could figure out her crime – anymore, for that matter, than they could their own. But one more time today, the judgement was in their hands. Their laws, allowing them to call the sepoys’ Rebellion Mutiny. One more time, as the hood darkened Sharif’s eyes, there was Usha, in a flash, among the throngs watching the gallows at the park.

Nadeem Zaman is the author of the novel *In the Time of the Others* (long listed for the 2019 DSC Prize in South Asian Literature) and the story collection *Up in the Main House & Other Stories*. His fiction has appeared in journals in the US, Hong Kong, India, and Bangladesh.

FICTION

Insomniac

ABDULLAH RAYHAN

At the first roar of the clouds, Selim opened his eyes, bloodshot, drowsy and warm like a smoking candle. He stared deep into the abyss swirling before him. In his ears, the moans of the distant sky rang damply, as if the sound came from beneath a heavy blanket.
Selim sat up, his head bent down, sweaty hands clasping each other, eyes wide open like a fresh wound. He felt his body being as light as thin air. In contrast, the atmosphere of the room felt heavy. It was as if the space of that room was dragging everything toward the ground. Selim could feel his head being pulled down with an unusual force.
Selim stood up, walked to a mirror. A bare oblong shaped glass stared back at him instead of his own reflection. The mirror was blank as if reflecting the void in his eyes. But his unwavering gaze didn’t blink, didn’t move, and remained attached to its nothingness, buzzing like the sharp painful throb on the side of his head.
Selim could feel the void. He suddenly grew sensitive to everything around him. On his left arm, a mosquito sat softly and sucked his blood drop by drop. Once the mosquito was full, the belly of the insect swelled and took the faded color of incarnadine sun. As it couldn’t bear its own weight, the mosquito fell to the ground with a faint thud. Yet it interrupted Selim while he examined the vortex of desolation before his eyes.
Night after night, Selim has tried to sleep but couldn’t. Something in his consciousness never allowed him to do so. His insomniac brain forced him to visualize the macabre thoughts he develops constantly during his sleepless nights. Worst thing is, his thoughts got all tangled up. Songs played in his head in wrong tunes, and the lyrics lost all the rhymes and alliterations. As the night grew deeper, everything became more and more cluttered.
Selim went to the bathroom to wash his face and lighten the heavy burden of his contorted thoughts.
“All the lonely persons... Thousands of albatrosses beneath the lake, beside the trees,



dancing and fluttering in the breeze... the wolf of Virginia Woolf”
He switched on the light. Its sharp yellow spectrum pierced through his eyes to forcefully show him the surrounding walls. Slowly, he grabbed the knob of the tap and turned it on. The water flowed fast like a flow of shiver down the spine.
Selim spread his fingers under the water. The water flowed in heavy stream with the swift motion. But the water slid off through his shivering fingers leaving his hands dry. He watched as all the water left his skin. Not a single drop remained. His hands remained empty, and he realized it when he tried to wash his face. He couldn’t collect and preserve the water in his hands as they kept escaping. His bloodshot eyes widened again at the flowing water.
“What is... happening?”
His breath heavily echoed within his chest, struggling to get out.
With shaking hands, he hurriedly turned on the shower. The water flowed. It gushed down heavily. A moment later Selim stood with his drenched clothes on. His wet cloths held on to his body, the fabrics clung to his skin like his skin clung to him.
But Selim himself remained dry. As the water droplets smashed against his skin, they rebuffed, dribbling to the floor, or held on to the clothes on his body.
From the tip of his hair, to the sole his feet, every single inch of him remained dry.
As water droplets touched his body, he could feel those beating and dripping down his skin leaving no trait. He couldn’t feel their warmth or chill anymore.
“What is happening...what is happening... what is happening!”
With a horrifying realization, without a moment’s hesitation he ran out of the bathroom leaving the water running.
Selim hurried up the stairs, and once he was on the roof, once he climbed onto the railing, once he was on the edge of the railing, he once again tried to feel the blowing storm and smell the rain. He couldn’t.
He jumped and tried to force his senses to feel the air against his skin but he couldn’t.
In the next moment, his wet body hit the concrete road. A small river of blood flowed from the cracks of his skull.
He once again tried to feel his life. He couldn’t.

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POETRY

For These Morbid Thoughts

SUMAYA MASHRUFA

For these morbid thoughts, go to the mountains and cry.
For these morbid thoughts, kill all your darlings.
For these morbid thoughts, shower as soon as you can.
For these morbid thoughts, know that it won’t pass.
For these morbid thoughts, say cheers to the angels.
That’ll piss them off.
Angels can’t stand stark naked truths. They are a bit showbizzy that way.
In fact, I think the world became a brooding self-righteous asshole just as the angels became American gigolos.

I flinch at the disgusting things I did when I was broken beyond recognition. I furrow my brow in eternal disapproval.
My kid has let me down.
I didn’t bring her up to let people in like that.
To allow strangers to take parts of me that were never meant for them.
But for these morbid thoughts, cleanse

with all the dead writers who spoke of love, friendship and all the other things in between.

For these morbid thoughts, hold yourself together.
For these morbid thoughts, raise your fingers to the last light.
For these morbid thoughts, place both your hands on the throat and feel the pulse.
Maybe choke a little.
Maybe try a little, for a minute or two, to be unresponsive.
For these morbid thoughts, thank god that friends who don’t know friendship are not there anymore.
For these morbid thoughts, take a longer stride.
Fuck those morose motivations of today’s time saying what novel banality it is to live sacredly successful.
I’ll fail as much as I want to.
And finally, for these morbid thoughts, fail better.

Sumaya Mashrufa is a writer and poet based in Dhaka.

