

FICTION

In the sand dunes

MAISHA SYEDA

His face was growing warmer, it seemed as though the intangible entity that was stinging his closed eyes was growing stronger. He forcibly raised a hand in front of his face to shield himself, pressed his eyes shut and tried to embrace the last few moments of his precious slumber. But the sun was adamant not to let him sleep; the heat on his face started to feel as though he was standing over a burning furnace. Groaning, Salim opened his eyes but the sun's rays stung them shut again. He rolled over on his side and covered his face with his blanket, half-afraid that the sunlight would penetrate the flimsy fabric or come through some of the holes that had recently become bigger after getting caught in his fingers and toes while he was asleep. Salim forced himself to sit up. The birds were chirping outside and the vehicles passing by his house on the street honked relentlessly. He looked at the ancient table clock on the floor beside him; it said 7:14 AM. Salim wanted to cover himself with the blanket and play dead.

Trying to force his body out of the charpoy, Salim's trousers caught one of the nails jutting out. He tugged at the cloth as hard as he could and let it tear a little, it came loose. Wishing he did not have to go to school, Salim grabbed his tattered sap green shirt from the floor beside him and walked over to the clay water pot as he tried to do the buttons on his shirt.

"You look a little pale, dear. Are you sure you're alright?" Salim's teacher asked.

Salim nodded his shabby little head and rubbed his eyes, yawning. Mualima Nessrine was a nice lady. These days she would ask Salim if he had eaten and showered, whether he needed anything, if she could help him with anything and if his Khalah had been visiting regularly; she did not even ask to see his homework that often anymore, only asked whether he was studying well. Brushing off the dust and debris



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

off his shirt, Salim's teacher ushered him to take a seat. Her smile was warm and comforting, almost as warm as his mother's was.

It had been three months, five days and a few hours since Salim's mother died. Salim had just turned nine a week before. He had slowly opened the door to his ancient, dingy little house after coming home from school one day, careful not to take it off its hinges, and walked in to find his mother on the floor beside the charpoy, taking shallow breaths. Her whole body had been convulsing violently, as though someone was shaking her by the shoulder, and her eyes had rolled back so far up in her head that only the crescent was still visible. Salim had stood there for an eternity, tears running down his face even though he did not understand why. He finally thought to run next door to call the neighbour.

He went to school about a month after. Everyone said he looked rather white considering his milky pink skin

tone, Salim could not understand why though. He had been feeling all right; his khalah had been staying with him for almost four weeks. She would cook for him and tell him stories about growing up in a small village in Libya and the kind of adventures she and Salim's mother would go on. On some scorching hot summer afternoons, they would go to the nearby lake and play in the water. She and her sister would compete to see who could hold their breaths underwater the longest. They would spend hours splashing around in the cool water before their father would come shouting at them, pulling them out of the lake by the ears. The quests had stopped after some time though, they were each married off to separate villages by the time they turned 17; their father, Salim's grand dad, had said it was to make sure they were safe and alive. However, his khalah had mentioned she could not take Salim home with her right then, her husband did not think it was safe for them or for Salim. "The military troops are keeping

a close eye on everyone", his khal had told her to tell Salim.

Random merchants and shoppers greeted Salim the next time he walked to school, which was a 25-minute walk through the local alkhadruat bazar. He would exchange salam with the ones he remembered talking to his mother; they would pat him on the head from time to time and say, "He is growing up so fast."

Their concerns had now changed. "Are you okay, abn?" one would say; another, an elderly man would usually chime in, "You look so white, almost like a ghost! Is someone looking after you?"

"Does he mean now or like all the time?" Salim pondered on whether he should say yes or no. He would not know what to say; his aunt had already left. It had been a few weeks. Some nights he would be brave, fighting the towering jinns draped in white, shadowy and floating around the room in the darkness. Other nights, he would

tremble under his blanket and recite as many surahs as he knew by heart, grasping the cloth over his head tightly and praying they would not pull him away by his feet. He remembered how his mother always used to say, "You're my brave little boy, there's nothing to be afraid of" and Salim would nod and bid them goodbye.

But he would wonder what made them think he was a ghost. Although, he was feeling rather light and faintish lately. It was proving to be difficult to ration the leftovers from the last time his aunt had brought him food, from which only a small container of lentil stew and rice was now left. Salim groaned thinking khalah would need to come visit him soon or he would have to learn cooking.

The other afternoon he had been lying on his charpoy, drifting off to the sound of his mother's lullaby when he felt a light cool breeze drift in through the window. The hairs on his body stood on their ends as he lazily reached for the blanket but he only felt its tattered fabric brush against his little fingers lightly, like the tip of his fingers caressing the surface of the water from a nearby lake. Salim's eyes opened to see where it was, frowning in his half-conscious state, and fishing for it around him, he realised it was there right beneath his hand. That is, he could almost see the brown and white patchwork of the fabric through the surface of his hand. He blinked his eyes a few times and rubbed them hard. Salim could only make out the faint outline of his arm as the warm afternoon sunlight reflected off the edges. The fleshy part though, where his skin was supposed to be—the part that was supposed to be solid—was transparent and the sun's ray travelled right through. Salim could see his blanket, his bed and everything right through his hand.

This is an excerpt from the short story, "In the Sand Dunes". Read the rest on *The Daily Star* and *Star Literature's* websites.

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POETRY

jani dekha hobe

after Meena Alexander

LAGNAJITA MUKHOPADHYAY

that single spot, *shunyo*, a hole that is filled to its circumference, I drive and the sun is bigger than I've ever seen and orange, look directly into it or, i had to write a poem to go along with the first one: the TV on mute, I begged for a sound, recovering from yet another flood, this house never shook
my grandma died when I was back in Nashville, heading out for a fire, thinking of rising into air I try to pour the tears back into my head again
in Bangla, death is a hit to the face, *mara geche*, to deprive, thirsty, a pain that is expected yet empty, and I know, Didai lost someone to drink cha with "it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one," or mistranslate
it was the day of a sudden freeze, three nights that would kill all the buds, cover your flowers, they said, last frost isn't till April and it is too soon when my grandma dies, no one here speaks of blood and i can't tell you because i stopped picking up when you call crying; it's not about you anymore everyone here declares life to be theirs only, not a chain, a whole country that robs us of grief or last rites and a photo of me by the body, dressed in petals, all in white a cancer, a stone inside, and a few days of nothing or so quick, expected until not, and we curse the empty place we inhabit and wish we were home. what have we done?
Set your feet into the broken stones and this red earth and pouring rain. For us there is no exile.
not another poem, but a litany of leaving, or moving, and you haunt me when there are bigger things, as if I have grown used to acceptance, a way to lie and forget these kinds of things call for storm shelters, somewhere to keep the lights on at night, i recall Baba once telling me that he would wake and cry in the dark, who had died then?
she used to bathe me, pour water over my head, and I look outside and it's the first ray of sun in a while, lighting up the pink cherry blossom unaware of the cold we cannot go home now either, and I can't tell you why we stay like I don't know if I loved you, no one lives upstairs anymore, what's the point?
there is no end in sight to this, lost paradise, I drive away again to where I do not have to think, a lamp placed near her head in Kolkata, from the power outage in Nashville



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

meanwhile white folks argue with my skin and feel nothing, *shunyo*, a different emptiness than ours, full of *clean void, masked, a house of souls, a doorway stopped by clouds.*
jani dekha hobe, I know I will see you, they say when they don't really know, not as if we come back as something else or if we feel them in the room still or not at all? why i give it up again and again, to come to another swift end, or hold it too long, longer than i want to, and what is the point, you only pretended like you knew *guddy*, the last person to call me that name, goodbye, what is in the air, they ask, and it must be a vacancy sign and a lengthy distance, or a road full of potholes
silent home, we keep ourselves away, tell me, *choto didai*, what does it mean? what are you saying? small and lump forming in back of throat, furniture sucked through the window
there are no walls between us no longer, the problem is you have never seen war on this soil, you fight yourself. you should see what it looks like to really lose they come here to try again, *abhiman*, an anger for something you love, a sense of disappointment but trust, and not your kind, i never liked your friends, you were cruel to strangers when my grandma died, it was just like another day, another time i could not go back while you walk around and no one tells you that you're wrong, false conjugate time goes on, does not just end when these things happen, nothing, nothing ends the world except the things that do, I just want to speak to her again
time is grief's first denial, not flying through ash but lifting mid-song to meet you, *shunyo* or nothing, *jani dekha hobe*, what will I do with all this time?

Lagnajita Mukhopadhyay is the author of the books *This Is Our War* (Penmanship Press, 2016) and *Everything Is Always Leaving* (M.C. Sarkar & Sons, 2019), and a poetry album *I Don't Know Anyone Here* (2020). She was the first Nashville Youth Poet Laureate, finalist for the first National Youth Poet Laureate, and Pushcart Prize nominee. With a Masters' in Migration and Diaspora at SOAS, she is now a Masters' candidate in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths. Find her work in *Poetry Society of America*, *La Piccioletta Barca*, and *Cream City Review*, among others.

PANDEMIC NOCTURNE 1:

December Dirge

REBECCA HAQUE

Ask me not of Grief.
For I have been burnt by its friendly fire
with blood and bits of oozing mortal flesh
spun flaky and ashen by its biting cold breath.
That was in the past.
Grief dug its teeth into me once more in the Pandemic
with my mother gone into hallowed ground
On the tenth of December twenty-twenty.
Those interlinked circles,
those zeroes in the last month of that year
became black holes in my brain
With my mother gone
Without a kiss,
without a last embrace,
without the promise of forgiveness and grace.

Rebecca Haque is a Killam Scholar and independent educator. She is a poet, writer, and translator affiliated with *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the World* [#MELOW], *Asia-Pacific Writers & Translators Association* [#APWT], and *New York Writers Workshop* [#NYWW].



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