



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

CREATIVE NONFICTION

HOMEWARD

I remained blissful in my ignorance. A creature of habit, armed with an unwavering conviction, I continued to make myself at home, arriving on doorsteps unannounced, walking in as if I owned the place, opening fridges without permission, ordering servants to do my bidding, turning on air conditioners which blew cold, expensive air into my sweat-stained, darkening skin.

SNRASUL

When I was born, my skin was dark, like my grandfather's, in whose arms I discovered my first home. Relatives old and new, whose disappointment was being nursed by my parents' fair complexions, looked from afar as my rotund cheeks melted into the sleeves of my dada's discolored half-sleeve shirt.

For months, I wept and slept, slept and wept, on the shoulder of this dark and gentle giant, occasionally detaching against my will to be breastfed by an exhausted ammu who was grateful, for the time being, to be my home away from home.

My dada's shoulders and my ammu's breasts carried me into a toddlerhood where my skin began to betray its bond with my grandfather, lightening to a porcelain whiteness so "dhob-dhoba," they said, that relatives used one hand to shield their eyes from its immaculate glow and the other to shield me from the evil eyes of envious entities. "Eto fair, so forsha" they said, extending the "sha" so that it floated through the air, eventually falling gently upon my soft, bright skin.

My mother had given birth to me into a household whose reach spanned across several infinities. My paternal grandfather's nine brothers and sisters stretched in one direction, following diverse histories of national significance, while my mother's nine brothers and sisters did the same in the opposite direction, herding in bhaat, bhorta, and Bollywood, with a special emphasis on the power of gossip and an unwavering devotion to Allah.

Doors opened in unison to receive me. My tiny feet waddled arrogantly across mosaic floors, as each relative, comprising every khala, mama, phupu, chacha, and everything else in between, bent down to lift me up into a sky of kisses and baby talk. Every direction led to a place I made my home, every person I met I made into a parent, every mattress I lay down on I made my bed.

If home is where the heart is, imagine the infinite expanse of the tiny heart beating inside my chest, omnipresent and greedy in its capacity to receive love and comfort, traveling across generations and hometowns, across low-rise apartments and tin-roofed huts, weaving through the streets of Dhaka, gliding along the rivers which pump life into the farmlands of Bangladesh.

And on these two familial wings, I traveled not only beyond and in between, but also up and down. Up to one of my chachas, my dad's cousin Pintu, spilling relentless history and dwarfing us with his limitless knowledge, turning rooms into stages and everyone else into audience members. Down to my mamas, Akbar, Anis and Bablu, and their factory of sweetmeats tucked

into the basement of my mother's ancestral three-story home, in the risky pathways of which I ran and jumped and bruised with cousins, stepping over floors carpeted by hungry flies.

But as I learned to speak with an underbite and my skin started to brown under the equatorial sun, alcoholics beat their children, druggies beat their wives, a lack of an education led to a lack of revenue. A decade of financial success came to an end for a Dhaka sweetshop that refused to evolve; seasoned by death and divorce, brothers stole land from sisters, sisters pawned off wedding jewelry to shield their husbands' fragile egos; my favourite dark-skinned dada reached his expiration date while the smartest chacha in the universe fell prey to the stock market and alcohol; some of our mothers fought losing battles against incurable diseases,

love, generosity, and, more practically, the redistribution of wealth? Was I also not the descendant of the nation's educated elite on one side, their roles etched permanently into this country's independence? And, on the other side too, was I not the progeny of the God-fearing owners of the infallible Alamgir Sweetmeats of Asad Gate, whose sponge roshgollas were as famous as Mimi Chocolate and Akij tobacco?

Were homes not permanent places? Were they not entities you could always return to?

Dhaka sprawled outwards into a hungry metropolis, fed by its cheapest and most valuable resource: its people. But all of us were not ready. My homes, without my knowledge, had been transformed into real estate. My cousins inherited these along with their parents' feuds, spewing blind hatred towards one another.

done, further ensuring that the amount on my plate was moderate and reasonable, fit for a guest.

I refrained from using the household amenities as much as possible, from bathrooms to fridges to televisions, ensuring minimal room for dissatisfaction. I expended an excruciating amount of effort towards becoming as quiet and as invisible as possible, existing apologetically. I was a constant trespasser, moving with nervous energy in the shadows, shunning attention, finding shelter in nooks and crannies. Whispers still reached my father's ears, speaking of his unwelcome son, proof of his failure as a single parent who had refused to remarry.

Who could blame them? Charity may begin at home, but the times were a-changing, baby, and Bangladesh with it. Charity was something we did in the 70s, in Bangabandhu's Bangla Desh.



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desperately scrambling away from inadequate healthcare at home and towards unaffordable healthcare abroad.

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Who could blame me? No matter the inevitability of change, certain things were immune, surely? Had I not been taught that familial relationships were unbreakable bonds which lasted forever? Had I not listened to story after story about messengers of God who had shunned material desires and preached kindness,

My ignorance could last only so long. I heard whispers through the newly formed cracks in the familial walls; sensed a heaving weariness at my arrival. I heard stories of food and AC remotes being hidden, safe from my greedy mouth and hands. These came from the same mamis whose cooking had once beckoned my Noakhali stomach with such enthusiasm, the same chachis whose thick gravies I had greedily slurped down for an entire childhood.

I could no longer deny it: I was overstaying my welcome.

But I needed a place to go to, too young to return to a motherless apartment after school, my father at work. Out of necessity, I arrived at closed doors and politely rang the doorbell, seeking permission to enter. At the dining table, my empty stomach desired to devour, but I chose carefully, extending my hand only after everyone else was

This was a brand new country, of Digital Bangladesh and a billion-dollar ready-made garments sector and middle-income ambition.

If every home had once held my heart, imagine the infinite numbers of pieces into which my heart had been broken. Homeless, I bounced from house to house, unwelcoming relatives to semi-welcoming family friends, from adolescence to adulthood, from East to West, running away from Dhaka's sprawling streets to London's historic alleyways.

This is an excerpt from the work "Homeward". Read the rest on *The Daily Star* and *Star Literature's* websites.

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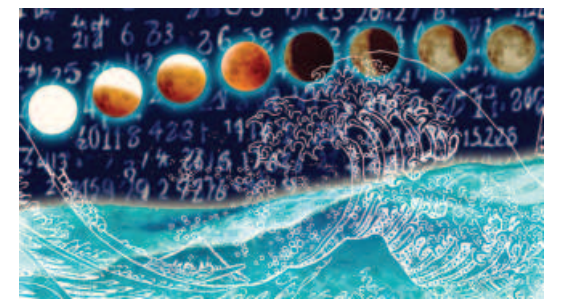
POETRY

JOJO-BURI

STEWIE CHATTERJEE

the moon watches over you, when whales beach themselves, the tides wash them back home; the moon looks down at you, turners of calendar pages, walkers of floodlit woods you stare back and see expanses of nothing every month, for the moon sleeps as you do, crescentine before and after, like roti to the hungry and distorted face to the fearful—the moon circles you and your kin, maybe even next of; it beckons man into wolf, the packs of hunters trace shadows only to be given away by instinct, slip-of-the-tongue howls and songs of ebb, of flow, of eerie miseries you long for

Stewie Chatterjee is a writer and law student based in Dhaka. Find their work @stewiechatterjee on Instagram.



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POETRY

Thoughts of an immigrant

TASNEEM HOSSAIN

She stands in front of the canvas and stares. Recollections of her childhood memories flash.

Her rendezvous with the flora and fauna of Sundarbans; her eye contact with the Royal Bengal tiger linger on.

Ah! the breeze and nature's playful song, singing a lullaby to her innocent mind. Down the memory lane all comes flooded as in a dream: the steamboat engine and the rough water tides.

Fifty years of separation from her birth country, she sighs.

Her paintings speak of her love divine of a country that she left behind.

Visitors stare, praises abound; tears roll down, she is flooded with the pressmen around.

She smiles and gives a valiant look. Now in a far off land she resides; She has not left Bangladesh, her motherland, behind.

Treasured in the heart, locked with a feather key; floating feathers of her past life, she feels free.

The meaning of her life she has found at last.

Life is full of echoes and contrast. Connected with the invisible cord Life plays on different beautiful chords.

Tasneem Hossain, Director, Continuing Education Centre (CEC), is a multilingual poet, columnist, op-ed and fiction writer, translator, and training consultant.



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