



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

FICTION

Wings Across A CITY WALL

It couldn't be said that she was a beautiful girl. She was skinny, but her face was oval and amber in colour, her eyes seemed to take half her face and the lips were soft and thick as papaya pulp. Her knuckles were a darker brown than the colour of the skin but her nails looked almost pink.

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To everyone she was just Shimu, though she had a formal name as well.

Shimu and Tushar had grown up together on an alley in the Mirpur area of Dhaka city.

Their houses were next to each other, separated only by a brick wall, about two metres high. The branches of a tree growing beside Tushar's house overhung the wall, its foliage shading a part of Shimu's courtyard. Since childhood they had always played together in the dusty streets of the neighbourhood, and had attended Mirpur Cantonment Public School & College.

Shimu lived with her family: her rickshaw pulling father, Fakhrul, with his black beard that tapered to an ocher tip like teeth decayed and stained by chewing betel leaves, who spent his leisure hours at the mosque near his home, the 'Jame Masjid' of the Mirpur Ceramic Factory; her mother, Ishrat, a tiny woman who worked in one of the many textile industries in the area; and her two brothers. Shimu had a sister, too, but she was married and lived on the other side of Dhaka, and they hardly ever met.

Shariful, her older brother, who worked in one of the garments factories of Mirpur would often say with pride: "It is we who dress all those people in Europe!"

Shimu was a dreamer. Since childhood, for Tushar, his moments with her were the best of his childhood.

Whenever they had the opportunity, they would take a rickshaw or a CNG auto and go to Dhanmondi, not so much for the high-rise shopping malls and restaurants, but because Shimu loved seeing Dhaka from above. She envied her classmates who lived on the upper floors of their neighbourhood's dingy grey buildings.

Tushar knew this and tried to take her to coffee shops or public places on the higher floors of the towers around Dhanmondi's busy streets. Up there, with her forehead and nose pressed against the glass panes of the large windows, Shimu would look down, her eyes shining.

The year 2009 was unforgettable for Shimu. The film by Ghiasuddin Selim, *Monpura*, had just been released in cinemas. They were still in school, and had slipped away to watch it together.

Shumi was enchanted. On their way back they stopped to sit down on a pile of red bricks a few streets from home. Shumi was still humming the song from the film:

Jao pakhi bolo taar e/ she jeno bhole na mor-e

'Go, bird, fly to him and tell him not to forget me.'

When, on the screen the song was playing, with actress Farhana Mili as a lovestruck fisherman's daughter dreaming of being with her sweetheart in a boat on the river, and the camera rose over the two, like a dragonfly, Shimu almost had tears in her eyes.

"Wouldn't it be lovely to be able to fly like a bird, high above, leaving all the misery and ugliness behind?" She said now with a far away look in her eyes.

"Why? What's so bad about the earth?" Tushar replied, stroking the dust at his feet.

"Oh! I'm tired of all this...the ground streaked red from betel juice spit, the traffic, the crowds of people going nowhere, yet everywhere, like stagnant rainwater. One day, I would like to leave all this behind, and travel. Fly far far away." She continued to hum:

Megher opor akash orre/ nodir opar pakhir basha...

'The sky floats over the clouds./ Across the river is the bird's nest.'

Then turning around to Tushar she said

with fervour: "Oh! Wouldn't it be wonderful to be like in the film, flying above the blue and green water?"

Tushar, suddenly, jumped up and began to wave his arms like wings imitating the actor in the film running around the girl.

"Okay! Enough! Silly!" Shumi shouted, smiling, turning her head around to follow him.

Tushar stopped in front of her, his hands on his thighs, panting.

"Well, since that's what you want to do, just flap around all day like a bird, I'll call you Pakhi. *Thik ache?*"

And from that day Shimu became Pakhi, for Tushar.

Years went by. Until it was the last year of school.

Every evening, Tushar climbed up the wall like a lizard, to sit on top with his legs dangling over the edge, to watch Shimu hand wash her shalwar kamiz in the copper tub.

"Pakhi!" He called her in a shrill voice.

She looked up at him for a moment, and shaking her head, went back to rubbing the bar of soap hard on the wet fabric, with her smile hidden by her long black hair.

It couldn't be said that she was a beautiful girl. She was skinny, but her face was oval and amber in colour, her eyes seemed to take half her face and the lips were soft and thick as papaya pulp. Her knuckles were a darker brown than the colour of the skin but her nails looked almost pink.

There were those who looked at her with interest at school, but she was rather shy, and talked mostly with her girl friends, or with Tushar, whom she would meet on the street, in front of the school's iron gate, to have a quick bite at one of the snack stalls, surrounded by voices and laughter.

Shimu had asked him, as a favour, not to call her Pakhi in front of the others, at school or in the family. She was afraid that someone might tease her or ask too many questions.

The days passed in an unvaried pattern, spent at school, and in studying, or at home with the family. Every night, her brother Shariful had arguments with his father. The girl and her mother listened from the kitchen. It seemed like he was becoming a trade unionist. Ishrat was very worried about this.

"We have no rights anymore! They squeeze the life blood from us and when they have no use for us they chuck us out!" He ranted at his father. "How many textile factories are there in Mirpur, abba? At least a dozen on each street. Yet, there are more factories than schools! So, it's better to send our children to operate the sewing machines than to try to better their future, right?"

Her mother feared for the husband's heart. She put her head through the hall door, her face worried. "Son, calm down..."

Shimu was behind her listening.

Shariful continued to shout at his father. "Look at *ammu!*" He pointed to his mother. "How can you not see? They have taken half of her life. For whom? Not for us! For Westerners who make themselves beautiful, pose with designer clothes..." Shariful said, walking with his chest out and his hands holding his shirt as if it were the edge of a jacket, "... ignoring the label saying 'Made in Bangladesh!' 'Made in Mirpur!' Does anyone care? And what if *ammu* had been one of the thousand victims of the collapsed Rana Plaza garment factory? Huh? Then you'd agree with me, wouldn't you?" Shimu peered from behind the door. Her mother marched to the chair where her husband Fakhrul was sitting. "Enough! Don't talk to your father like that! What's his fault?" She said with controlled fury.

Shariful rolled his eyes. "Oh! It's useless! Forget it! Better I step out for a bit, so tomorrow

I'll be calm and ready for the grind!" He went out, slamming the door.

These were the moments when Shimu wanted to sprout wings and fly away. She went out into the courtyard, and in a low voice called to her friend on the other side of the brick wall.

Within a few minutes Tushar's smiling face emerged over the top.

"Take me away..." she whispered.

When they took a CNG through the streets of Dhaka, the sun was already setting. But on these busy roads, unrelated it seemed to time or the planetary movements of the sun or the moon, the only relevant thing was the continuous motion of people and vehicles moving in every direction.

Shimu looked at them from between the green grates of their auto-rickshaw stuck in traffic, with the green-gold orna of her dress covering her nose and mouth from the smog.

"So what do you think ants say when they collide against each other as they move along their line?" Shimu asked Tushar, who sat next to her, pressed into the narrow space.

He looked at her with the expression of someone falling from the clouds. "Eh...?" She burst into laughter: "Nothing, nothing..."

They stopped in front of Batighor and entered the building.

Inside the ascending elevator she asked where he was taking her.

"To the library," Tushar replied excitedly.

"You? In a library?" The girl exclaimed incredulously.

As soon as they entered the premises, he took her by the hand and dragged her through the shelves full of books.

"Pakhi, Pakhi... You never trust me."

They went out onto a small balcony. A girl was reading a book while sipping a drink, sitting on a small round iron table. Tushar led her to the parapet of the balcony and made her look below to the busy street.

Shimu was seized with a deep happiness as she put her elbows on the railing and with her chin resting on both hands, she observed the random movement of black dots on the surface of the grey pavements. On the roof of a low building to the left side of the balcony, men were having their meal, standing or sitting at different tables.

When Shimu looked down she forgot about everything. She could have spent hours like that—it relaxed her.

Tushar, beside her, looked down and at the girl's face, trying to understand what she found so special about those little human ants below. He hummed:

Nodir opar pakhir basha/mone bondhu boro aasha

'Across the river dwells the bird/ And in my heart, o friend abide my hopes'

This is an excerpt from Stefano Romano's short story "Le ali sulla città" that has been translated from Italian by Neeman Sobhan. Read the full story on Star Literature and The Daily Star's websites.

Stefano Romano is a well-loved Italian photo-journalist and writer among the migrant communities of Rome. He has travelled widely in South East Asia and published books about Malaysia and Indonesia. Among his books, *Sweet Light (Agamee Prakshani, 2020)* was reprinted in English in Bangladesh and *My Bangladesh Tales* was published in 2012.

Neeman Sobhan is an Italy based Bangladeshi fiction writer, poet, columnist, till recently teaching English and Bengali at the University of Rome. Among her publications are an anthology of columns, *An Abiding City: Ruminations from Rome; a fiction collection, Piazza Bangladesh; and a poetry collection, Calligraphy of Wet Leaves.*

POETRY

NO DOOR

JOHN DREW

In Mutanabbi Street
Hajji Muhammed sits
Outside what had been
His shop. His five sons
Were killed and the books
That filled his shelves
Lie senseless on the floor.
There are no walls. No door.

This poem is about a bookshop in Baghdad destroyed in the Iraq War. Mutanabbi Street, named after a great Iraqi poet, has long been famed for its bookshops.

John Drew is an occasional contributor to The Daily Star. A collection of his articles is due to be published later this year by ULAB Press.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

Of hills, lakes, and loss

A.M. FAHAD

Bury your feet where its green
And when the air is thin you will see
The ghosts of people who have lived and loved
Here
Each, with their own story to tell
The roots of these trees go deeper than the
Flesh they've sunk their teeth in
But there's blood on my mouth as we speak, so I ask you
What makes a story?
A hypothetical world of could have and would have
Of little boys and their latins spinning and digging themselves in uneven soil
As the world spins on its own axis, a story is
A becoming of death
Of drowned kings and their austere palaces
Of boots and guns
And fucking americans
Look to these uneven lands
When you see flames consuming the trees
You will find hands that weep in red and a nebulous view
Of The Karnaphuli carrying withered dreams
Houses in embers and houses in ashes
There is no sticking to their stick homes
No clinging on to life
The prairies that linger in the scanty aftermath
Hide their faces
As the seconds pass with smoke, as boots desecrate the soil underneath
There are no bombs, no aeroplanes
But there are bodies. Bodies.
Of people. Of water. Of flattened hills.
Every other day
A deafening silence echoes over
The flooded lake
This is not a story
This is not a story

A.M. Fahad is an aspiring poet and writer from Dhaka. He uses vivid imagery and elements of nature to encapsulate his emotions with words, which often end up in a thought train rather than a conclusion. Find him at amfahad1747@gmail.com.



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