

FICTION

Animality

K.M. AREFIN

TRIGGER WARNING: ANIMAL brutality
"Wake up, Amir. Rise and Shine!"

"But Papa, it's still dawn", I said annoyed.

"5:30 is a lot. The earlier you rise, the brighter the day you have."

"Yeah, yeah" I murmured, as I started to remove my blanket. A gush of winter cold touched me and I could feel the wind of mid-January fondle my skin. Splashing ice-cold water on my face, I came outside shivering to the porch, in search of a towel. The last sound of Azaan was ringing from a distant mosque. The misty streets showed the vital signs of winter. A strange fog wrapped around our bungalow and one could hear nothing but the bicycle bells, rushing with morning newspapers. Papa was going on his morning walk with Snoopy, our little white furball. "A man of uncompromising discipline", I thought, as I approached my room.

Aziz Reza Chowdhury, my father, was the Chairman of Khorogpur. He was renowned and admired all over the town. His love for his pets made him the small-town legend of Khorogpur. Locally, he was known as the 'Poshu Premik Chairman'. It was a mini-zoo inside our bungalow; we owned more than a dozen pets. Starting from Mr Winchester, the beautiful green parrot to Rubi the coltish sparrow, we owned a flock of birds. My childhood passed feeding those birds in the morning. An antique aquarium occupied our drawing room. It was filled with a school of goldfish, a romantic pair of Guppy fish, and some moody turtles. I owned a bunch of rabbits and called them the 'Flash family'. But the most elegant was our dog trio Gruppy, Ruppy—the two German shepherds—and our favourite, the cute Maltese, Snoopy. The dog trio was my Papa's favourite. A huge part of his day was spent taking care of them.

While having breakfast, I heard Momin Bhai, our caretaker, shouting my name from the yard. I hurriedly went to the porch and saw him all sweaty and panting. He kept blabbering about how Snoopy got into a fight with a local stray and got injured. Papa was angry and told Momin uncle to bring him his double-barreled rifle. I hurriedly went inside, fetched the weapon, and joined Momin Bhai to see the incident myself. It was distressing, the whole ordeal.

Snoopy was the cutest. She was small and fluffy, like a little cushion ball. Papa used to spend a lot of his time with her and she always used to follow him to his walks.

Well, Papa was an animal lover, the Poshu Premik Chairman. I wished he had spent more time with me than with his dogs. I got along with the animals too, but not like he did. He had a different kind of affection for them. There were days he used to lecture me on Gautam Buddha and his love for animals. At times, he used to refer to Snoopy as his best friend. "Ah! Those boring lectures. I wonder when he will say that his dogs are his better child."

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The story that he told me went on something like this:

While returning from his walk today, Papa met Jalal uncle, our neighbour, on the way. As they were chatting, Papa threw a piece of steak at Snoopy to stall him for a bit. Suddenly a black stray dog came out of nowhere, grabbed the steak, and made a run for it. Snoopy wasn't the one to let go either, she ran after the stray and got into a fight. What could our cute little Snoopy do up against this street dog? She was eventually injured as the stray bit her on her thighs.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

"How dare that dog! Trying to steal from us and biting our Snoopy in front of Papa, the Poshu Premik Chairman of Khorogpur." Now, even I had become angry.

As I rushed there with Momin Bhai, I saw Papa's reddish face solemn like the setting sun. Snoopy hid behind him and yelped seeing me and Momin Bhai. The skinny, black dog stood 10 feet away from him. It was trapped inside the corner street, surrounded by locals. The angry mob had hundreds of bamboo sticks in their hands. The stray seemed horrified and was already limping. I could understand that it already had a couple of bamboo hits. Papa came towards us, took the gun from Momin Bhai, and aimed it at the dog. I could see his finger pushing the trigger slowly, very slowly.

Justice was being served. The dog was old, skinny, and dirty. It had mud splashed all over and seemed like a thief about to get punished. It was panting with its tongue out and we could almost see its heart pumping. As I curled my lips with disgust, it looked into my eyes. The old-stray had a pair of fathomless eyes. They were watery, pale, and almost empty. Suddenly, I recognised the old stray. I saw him walking by the streets in search of food. He used to stand in front of our bungalow, begging for food to live a little longer. I remember him staring at our dog trio with vile jealousy, as they ate inside our flowery yard, while he starved for days. I could feel his hunger, thirst, envy, and his complaints to this cruel town of Khorogpur.

'BOOM—the bullet was shot and the old-

stray yelped for one last time. I could hear him apologising for his mistakes but it was too late. I could only understand him when it was too late.

The heavy nine mm bullet pierced through his throat and the old, disgusting street dog fell to the ground. But fate had more in store for him. The almost dead body was breathing heavily and its opened throat pumped a rush of blood. We could hear the gargles inside his heart as he tried to scream for one last time, but there was no sound except the rumbles. He was trying his best to breathe a little more oxygen from the cold winds of January. The patience of the mob broke as the stray was still breathing. They abruptly roared and charged him with their sticks. His head cracked open and his tail was pulled out. Hits after hits, as his jaw broke

into pieces and his ribcage turned into a lump of flesh. In minutes, when the locals finally stopped hitting, his entire body was turned into an uneven chunk of meat. His bones and organs were unified into a thick, red Jell-O.

I guess the locals were furious as the old-stray bit the animal lover chairman's dog. After a while, the crowd dispersed and I followed Papa from behind. Momin Bhai walked beside me and started blabbering again, "How dare that stray hurt Snoopy!"

I walked quietly beside him. Momin Bhai kept on "Aziz Sir is truly an animal lover. No one would have cared so much for their dog like he did."

I nodded without realising, just to avoid the conversation. What could I say? Did Bhai see what I saw inside that old-stray? Did my pet lover Papa see?

I cautiously looked behind as I was leaving and saw a bunch of large, purplish, and healthy flies, gathering around that clammy piece of meat. I couldn't stare anymore, my eyes looked away.

We kept walking down the road silently, as a shady brown fog wrapped us around. I saw the stray dogs, cats, and rats of Khorogpur glaring at me. A flock of crows circled above us and cawed ominously. The sky had darkened and they all glared at us. What was in their eyes?

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ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

POETRY

QAHR

"Have you seen Qahr?"

TIASHA IDRAK

Let me tell you about Qahr. A word not in my mother tongue, It doesn't roll off my tongue easily Yet the taste is quite the familiar one. They say if you take the largest pot. Pour a pitcher full of anguish, despair and oppression,

Let it simmer, burn it in high heat For seven decades and five, That's how you shall be served Qahr, A dish so bitter, from a pot that never ends. Qahr sounds like the buzz of Zannanah Drones that never quiet in an occupied sky, Where the children are unfamiliar with silence, Afforded a sound sleep only in death. Qahr is in your phone screen, Lingering like second hand smoke, Settling in your conscience as you live your 9 to 5, Suffocating from the ashes that you can't touch. Qahr takes the shape of legs, Dangling like branches, A family crushed under the rubble, Together in life, together in death. Qahr takes the shape of a mother's hand Smearing in her child's blood, It resides in her refusal to wash it off, For it is the last sign of her child (her last treasure). Qahr tastes like an unopened packet of biscuit, A father's last gift to his child, as he tenderly places it in a limp hand, It is in "Dear, eat this in heaven."

It's in the single earring pinned to a grandfather's pocket,

Soul of his soul, Who will never open her eyes, It's in every name scribbled on a white shroud, Some with no name.

Qahr takes the shape of everyday items, Things you will never see the same anymore— It's in plastic bags—in green, blue and white, As a father lifts them up in the sky, A small forearm peeking out from one, A leg from the other, His child in pieces.

Qahr is in red quilts with flower prints, The ones you use in a winter night, But now their purpose is rather different, As they carry mangled limbs, The aftermath of an airstrike.

It's in ball point pens and markers, Children writing their names on hands and feet, It's in every tortured wail of a young man, Hands desperately digging through rubble, Clinging to the hope to find life underneath. It is in the destroyed whiteboards in hospitals, Crumpled like a discarded paper, Smudged ink, a doctor's last words, "We did what we could, remember us."

Press vests stained scarlet, One after another, A graveyard of children, Twitter obituaries typed in dying breath, A timeline full of ghosts, Never ending list of martyrs, As the world watches in silence. Qahr is when truth is unheard, Slaughter endorsed, It's in the dance of a cruel soldier On the wreckage of a destroyed city. Qahr hides in words like "conflict", Spewed by the Empire's stenographers, Killed versus Dead, Hostages versus Criminals, Attack versus Blasts, Words wielded to dehumanise, Qahr is in every new acronym

WCNSF "Wounded Child, No Surviving Family" Qahr is when rage and grief too, are privileges. Qahr rains with white phosphorus, Burning into a child's skin, Woven around every stolen limb, Death certificate issued before being named. It waits with the lines of trucks carrying aid, Stuck outside the border, It's in tent scrap with period stain, In every amputation (without anaesthesia). In every single bite of bread, Eaten only with salt, The only meal of the day, In every sip of sewage water, Pouring down a parched throat, That's the taste of Qahr.

It's in the blood stained keffiyeh, Press conference in a mountain of the dead, Held by doctors and children, Using a foreign tongue, Begging to be seen, to be believed, For some lives are more precious than others it seems. It's in razed fields, desecrated corpses, Bombed kindergarten and churches, Star branded on skin, in burnt olive trees. Music award shows outweighing Handcuffed remains in execution grounds, Applause drowning the gunshots, Qahr is silent. Qahr is loud. (To suffocate, endure, burn and drown) Dear listener, Once again I ask, Have you heard of Qahr? Do you know what it looks like?

Dear listener, Once again I ask, Have you heard of Qahr? Do you know what it looks like?

Tiasha Idrak is submerging in her own ocean of thoughts. She reads, writes, doodles and daydreams most of the time.

POETRY

Never to a full stop



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

ARIFUL ISLAM LASKAR

You muttered, "Full Stop," I echoed, "Rest in Peace," In the silence, sentences perish. Is it the end of us? Or just the final decree We imposed on one another? Two parallel lines never meet Won't we fight or quarrel again To love again; Grief comes...Grief departs Dust covers the window And, dust veils our hearts;

When is it not time for a full stop? To allow words to linger, To let language cascade, Like leaves rustling in the breeze, Or feathers carried by the wind's embrace And, thus we smile to brace To start life all over again Never to a full stop—to gain.

Ariful Islam Laskar is a poetry lover and you can send him a poem through y2k.arif@gmail.com.

PROTITI RASNAHA KAMAL

I took a lonely stroll on the hollows of your cheeks dusted off your iris painted on a kiss. Wandered through and through On your limbs akin to logs, And swam across your body, Traveled as an albatross. I placed my humming buzzwords Some with love, in your ears And rhymed myself with bedsheets To save poems from our affair.

You were bleeding in my sandbox, The grains clumped to forge a bond With scheming trails of petals, Leading to our pots of gold. The shadowed realms are waiting, poison is far too common in love, So, I meddled with your toxins, to break them into shards. Hold your tongue my sorry lover, Know that you've forgotten to speak, Let go, so I can steer you, Let my kiss render you meek.

Protiti Rasnaha Kamal is a graduate student at Tufts University, USA. Her debut poetry collection titled Bare Conversations was published in January 2022 by Journeyman Books.



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

A journey through you