

POETRY

Possible answers to "Why did you block me?"

QAZI MUSTABEEN NOOR

I needed to de-escalate. When an animal is cornered, it's either a fight or flight response. Flight is always beautiful. If you're "Bulgarian split squats", then I have bad knees. It didn't spark joy. A band aid must be ripped off sooner or later. Sooner rather than later. Sensory overload, overstimulation, you know where I'm going with this. "You give me miles and miles of mountains and

I'll still ask for the sea." What you have is "narcissism disguised as altruism", and I'm not the problem it isn't me hey. Perhaps the most important one is this: you'd rather die than ask me that question. That's why. That's why I've blocked you. Hope that answers your question.

Qazi Mustabeen Noor is a PhD candidate at Queen's University at Kingston, Ontario, Canada.



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

L for less

AFNAN BINTEY HELAL

I traverse between solid and liquid—
A semi-form leaking from the edges.
A mosaic of mind, tethering and bulging
To transgress.
Spots on the road or bends in the trend
Would suffice to transcend
Me to the azure of "love".
"Love" did not have me at 'hello'
Nor does it cure the cries!
"Love" is the colour of the bright yellow surrounded
by stars on the skies,
Blinding at night and binding at the morrow!
I come cauterised and not quenched
From the heaviness of my being.
I rescind, take reprimand, and reapportion
The self to appropriate my grieving!

Afnan Binte Helal is currently pursuing her Master's degree in English Literature and she believes "love" is only beautiful in fiction.

FICTION

AT HOME

You keep blabbering and yapping as you go about pulling the curtains and turn all the tube lights on. You don't even ask if I like sitting in the twilight half-dark better. You move about my world as if you own the place.

ADHORA AHMED

This is the first time I let you in, but you've already made yourself at home. You are bumbling around in my kitchen, as though you have been making me tea for a lifetime. Thin beams of orange sunlight enter through the window grills. There are too many buildings around to let in ample air and light. I wish you would stand by the window, so I could see how those beams fall on your face. I want to picture you somewhere more open, like a field, where you could be bathed in the full late-afternoon glow. But then you break the spell by turning the kitchen light on, without a break in your monologue from a conversation whose thread I've lost long ago. You don't even ask me. But I've already told you to make yourself at home. The bright whiteness of the new LED bulb turns everything insipid. With no shadows on

your face anymore, no room for imagination, I start to question if you're really as cute as I thought. "Do you take milk and sugar?" You lift your eyes from the simmering pot. Now that's sweet, I must admit. But I want it raw. You want the same too, but I didn't mean just about the tea. It has been a while since I gave in to something with full abandon. I want the rush of young love again, however cliched as it sounds. I want to be caught up in the whirlwind of passion, even though I've lived too long to be that delusional. But you keep talking and talking, and as I try to tune in once again, I'm reminded that we are not on the same wavelength. We haven't read the same books. Hell, you barely read. But then, you go a bit still as you check the pot again. You lean in and smell, and if you want,

you can grab a ladle and taste the tea. The momentary silence makes me imagine a scene of domestic bliss. You are at home. You've been making me tea for a lifetime. You cradle the tray in your nimble arms, closing the distance between us. Your body is as graceful as water. I don't even register your voice. But then, you claim my coffee mug as your own. You don't even ask. You keep blabbering and yapping as you go about pulling the curtains and turn all the tube lights on. You don't even ask if I like sitting in the twilight half-dark better. You move about my world as if you own the place. When I bring the teacup to my lips, it is ice cold. This is not your home. Adhora Ahmed doesn't like breathing because love is in the air.



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

Half eaten mornings

RAYA MEHNAZ

It is impossible to distinguish when, but I think
My loss of faith coincided with your arrival.
Not to say,
The sacrosanctity of human connection is lost on me.
But mostly I have
Learnt to take the smaller, seemingly meaningless moments
And cherish them instead:
A walk in the park;
A kiss on the side of my lips;
And a doodle in the space between your fingers.
I have recognized that I rarely ever want a lifetime of mornings; Just some mornings: a tea that has been steeped for too long, a half eaten slice of bread.
Or further back, sleepy smiles;
And, a head resting on my thigh.
On a wispy morning, sprawling on your bed,
It strikes me that I never witnessed you mid-sneeze.
And I would wonder, later
about never seeing your mid-afternoons.
Etched in the harshest yellow,



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

With squinted eyes, and sweat-drenched clothes.
It would amaze me that
There have been snippets in time where I never knew you, and
Likely would not in the future when we part ways.
Yet, you have seen my bare stomach, and cradled my head in front of the rays of a dying sun.
But you will never know the resemblance between my mother and I.
Because you will never meet her.
I did say that
My loss of faith coincided with your arrival;
But lately all I have left is faith.
of an iridescent, tender, and hopeful love.
For you.
And for me.
A love that is ours,
but not a love that we will share.

Raya Mehnaz is a contributor. Find her at mehnazraya008@gmail.com.

These are our top picks for the poetry and flash fiction competition held in February



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

POETRY

Kissing STRANGERS

RAIAN ABEDIN

Kissing strangers only feels good
If the stranger is strange enough
to lay on some bathroom floor while
you do it
the kissing isn't the important part
the looking is—but it's only important
when you're not actually doing a good job
at looking.
Stop looking for god in me, I'm paper wreaths
and I might crinkle too loudly. It's 4am.
Or so I say for dramatic effect,
we don't actually need
to kiss—just pretend to be drunk or
asleep so I can cut off my tongue and leave it next
to you.
Love is more than the additive
power of all of its synonyms
But I can call your bullshit, love isn't
poetry.
It can mix with wordless languages
Where everything ends up. Here,
take this silence
give it a name, call it your heart, and
fall asleep.
The entirety of this story can be read
out loud



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

if you know the truth—even strangers, the real kind, have more to say in these quiet hours—when a rhythm takes over, it's our heart/it's your silence. I am still asking you if I can kiss you as a stranger I still want to know if the strangeness has a point.

Raian Abedin is a poet, a student of Biochemistry, and a contributor for The Daily Star.

Persephone's blood

RUSAFA RAHAT

Your gaze, a dagger, cuts through me,
I'm the rotten pinked flesh upon the
butcher's hook.
Flies swarm, craving Chanel rouge
strawberries and pale yellow seeds,
But find only seeping plasma wounds
and restless dreams.
Your look, a death knell, pronounced
me gone,
As if I were already among the
departed.
Persephone's blood stains
glistening snow,
Like crushed maraschino
cherries
between pearly
teeth.
I forgot I was
stolen away,
Lost in your
chilling stare,
I had been taken
from myself.

Rusafa Rahat is a STEM student, IT intern, published poet, hopeless romantic, diplobrat, and illustrator currently residing in Vienna, Austria. You may find more of her work on @thornchapel on Instagram.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA



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Shrines

MAISHA SYEDA

Words have crashed onto your shores,
And lovers have been put to sleep
On beds of nails and ashes
And mausoleums in your name torn
down
Because of the upkeep.
Too many builders paid the price
And I—The King who ordered it—
Was kept awake wondering.

Maisha Syeda is a writer, painter, lecturer, and a Sub editor of Star Books and Literature.