



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

FICTION

Hair cream

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

“Speaking of the devil, where is our muezzin? Can someone call Rashed and ask if he is really coming? We have waited enough already. Or do we need to mic him over now?”

The mosque committee was quite displeased with Rashed, their young muezzin. They feared he embarrassed them a bit too much these days. He was not even present at the meeting today on time. “I’m on my way,” he had said on the phone, assuring them that they could start in his absence. But they waited anyway. Tardiness was only one in a long list of their complaints about Rashed.

“We cannot fault him for running a business,” one of the grandees, Shafik Islam, said as they waited, “I’ve seen many of you lot do that. It is just the things he does for a little bit of cash...”

“What is he up to now?”
“Selling hair cream!” The Imam said, appearing exasperated.

“What, for hair growth?” asked the grandee.
“Well, I suppose that would be of help to you, Imam shaheb.”

The Imam stuttered, said, “I am happy with the way I look, Shafik bhai. It is all Allah’s wish. Unlike our Jomir bhai here. I saw him buy one of the bottles from Rashed just yesterday.”

The Imam’s sudden finger-pointing at the man stunted the latter’s plan to remain invisible in the meeting. Jomir was a quiet man by nature, rarely speaking and only nodding away to anything that was being agreed upon.

Shafik asked, “Did you buy the ones for hair or for something down there, Jomir?”

They did not wait for the man’s mumbling defense. The snickering filled the small room. They were seated on plastic chairs, holding their cups of tea in their hands in the absence of a table.

Jomir put his cup down on the floor. “I only bought it to be polite,” he said, “He had caught me at a bad time, had me cornered...”

The men shrugged. “That happens with him around,” one of them said. “I once got cajoled into buying his jinn-repellent water! He even soft-soaped me into believing he had recited the entirety of Surah Al-Baqarah before blowing twice into the water.”

“And how did our young Rashed’s spit taste, my dear fellow?”

The man shut up, fearing he had overshared. “Why does he do this, really? It is bad enough in a climate like this,” the Imam said, sounding hurt. “No one gives us any respect

these days. They see him doing this nonsense and the repercussions fall on us!”

He was agitated, and his face turned pinkish as he furiously thumbed over his prayer beads.

“Calm down, Imam shaheb,” Shafik said. “It wasn’t that long ago you were selling jinn-sponsored tabizes...we all make mistakes.”

Jomir sprang up to deal a blow, “I remember that quite well, Imam shaheb, I had to fork out a fair amount of money to buy that. You had promised that if I put it over my daughter she would stop thinking about going to Canada!”

give him any ideas. I already suffer enough when he calls everyone for prayer with that raspy, horrid voice. Imagine if he starts using the mosque’s microphone to sell his cream!”

As if to deny his seniors any further consternation, Rashed arrived at last. He bore an embarrassed face, “Apologies! I got caught up a bit on my way here.”

The Imam would not look him in the face. “Why, Rashed? Got busy selling some of your hair cream?”

Rashed smiled, saying, “We must survive



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“You can’t blame me for that. The tabiz would never work once she’d already gone to Canada. It’s too far!”

One of the men interrupted to say, “I believe the jinn couldn’t get a visa to pursue her and work his magic,” only for the Imam to glare at him.

“This is no joking matter,” he was told, “I am seeing that the devil has begun to infiltrate our gathering...”

“Speaking of the devil, where is our muezzin? Can someone call Rashed and ask if he is really coming? We have waited enough already. Or do we need to mic him over now?”

The Imam said, “Let’s not go that far. Don’t

somehow, shouldn’t we?” he said.

“But there is a limit,” the Imam said, “We can’t exactly be swindling, can we?”

Rashed kept smiling, opting to weather the snark.

“Tell us, young man, does the hair cream even work?” they asked, “Are there sightings of a full harvest?”

“Too early to tell, you know,” he said, taking off his skullcap to reveal a shining, barren dome, “I’m trying to figure it out myself.”

Shahriar Shaams has written for Dhaka Tribune, The Business Standard, and The Daily Star. Find him on X: @shahriarshaams.

POETRY

How to exist

RAIAN ABEDIN

When there’s a lull in the air, I get the feeling that I’ve scraped the bottom of my fleshy insides. I’ve decided to stop looking at how sweat curls over and around my skin, I think this is all there is. But then I look at my neck and I’m no longer a person. My mother tells me, over and over again, that my posture is because I never sit right. I am too uncomfortable in my own skin. I am not even a person when I talk because I break things when I speak. Sometimes, through my words, I try to be like you who is not phased by this. A person, I could carve my face to resemble you and use

But I think the wind will come and it will carry some more of my meaninglessness away and into the sky that now looks a little pink and there they might even grow and start their own lives. I think I will become the sky, and the concrete, and then my father will enter my room to tell me something but I won’t hear him.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

the light to hide the parts that don’t need seeing. But at night I forget and my shape resembles a child. You know how to love and keep your back straight—I think all of me tends to break every now and then.

But I think the wind will come and it will carry some more of my meaninglessness away and into the sky that now looks a little pink and there they might even grow and start their own lives. I think I will become the sky, and the concrete, and then my father will enter my room to tell me something but I won’t hear him. We have the same ears, you see. I will wait for him to leave before I tell him whatever I want to, I will wait for him to stop looking at me because I cannot learn how his love works any more than I can learn how my own does. What do I do with these? Someone in the streets keeps telling me to carry an umbrella, he spends his evenings bathing in sun and dust—and he allows himself to smile between every word and every beam of light. And he allows his silence to grow to hold on to him, at times he looks like the sun. *Where will you go if it rains?* My mouth wants to open but I think I know the answer.

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Khero Khata

Welcome to Khero Khata, Star Books and Literature’s writing corner. In the first week of every month, we will post a prompt soliciting submissions in the form of flash fiction and poetry. Selected pieces will be published in print and/or online.

This month’s prompt: Heat

Email us your submissions (500-words) at dsliteditor@gmail.com by 25 May, 2024.

POETRY

A childhood memory

NAWAL NAZ TAREQUE

Dust patterns have gathered around my landline phone, huddling around the maroon. my fingerprints take some dust off of it, and they rejoice. it is 7:34 pm now, which means your tutor has just left, after leaving her half-finished cup of tea and double finished plate of biscuits on your desk. I press the buttons quickly, your landline a series of 7s and 4s and 0s and 1s away from me. *please pick up*, I whisper. you do—oh wait it’s your maid, no wait it’s your grandmother, and she asks me how I am today. I lie easily, a fearless teenager, and ask her how she is today. she lies casually, a war veteran, and



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

calls you from afar. i can hear your brother’s breath from the other side, still a beginner at eavesdropping, your penguin steps ring in my ear from afar, and here you are, sitting beside

the phone, its springy wires extending needlessly. i switch to the cordless phone, black in ecstasy, taking three strides to my room and closing the door behind me. *jaanish ajke*

ki hoise? I exclaim, and tell you about my day. *bol bol*, you reply, and begin to hear my tales. both of our telephone bills skyrocket, hearts and ears in sync. in time, I learn to listen and she begins to weave her tales.

the phone numbers have changed, the people have relocated. i have yet to pay my telephone bills. i remain a shaking urn, spilling out stories from spotlights in separation.

Nawal Naz Tareque, based in Connecticut, the United States, is a computer science major by day and a (growing) poet by night. She wonders about the mundane too often and can often be found cracking terrible jokes when she returns home.