

FICTION

Storm child

SARAZEEN SAIF AHANA

Then you stirred. Your tiny forehead wrinkled, and you cried. That first, piercing cry that announces the arrival of a new soul in this world. And then your mother shivered at that sound, and she opened her eyes.

You must have heard the story of your birth a thousand times by now, sweetheart. Your mother and I—home alone. The others were out watching Ana's dance recital, but your mom had been feeling tired, so she stayed back, and I stayed with her. She was just seven months along, but she went into labour. The storm struck, and the rest of the family were forced to stay at the school. Your father ignored the weather warnings and drove home anyway, to find he now had a beautiful little girl to love. Your parents' joy was immense.

What we never told you was that you were stillborn.

Your mother went into labour, and it was the fastest delivery I've ever seen in my life. She bled like a river, and I thought I might lose my own daughter.

I lifted you from her and quickly wrapped you in towels and placed you on the bed. I was panicking, and your mom was bleeding and she had fainted. The storm was raging, and I was watching my own baby girl die in front of me.

and happy, nothing else mattered.

"My life for theirs. My soul for theirs. Whatever it costs, I'll pay it a thousand times over. Just give them back to me. Let them live. Let them be healthy and happy and whole." I said it like a mantra, again and again until my voice gave out.

Then you stirred. Your tiny forehead wrinkled, and you cried. That first, piercing cry that announces the arrival of a new soul in this world. And then your mother shivered at that sound, and she opened her eyes.

"The baby?"

My joy was a thing so vast it drained me. I carefully, wearily, placed you on her chest. She held you, and she began to cry. Your father burst into the room and started laughing and crying at the same time. I left the three of you there, but just before I closed the door, I met your gaze. It was not the gaze of a newborn infant at all. It was the look of a soul a thousand years older than me.

I went to my own room and slept. Never before had I felt so tired, and never since. When I woke up, the storm had cleared and everyone

was old enough to understand, and then we told him about you.

And we kept a very careful eye on you as you grew.

You could feel things. Strange things. Your Granddad's friend was a madman who attacked and murdered a little boy, wrapped the body in curtains and threw him into a landfill. You sensed the evil in him and told us.

Your Uncle Sam began associating with a rough crowd, and he was slowly being drawn into their world. You heard their voices, and you asked about them. He stopped hanging out with them shortly afterwards. They were human traffickers.

The house next door caught fire a few days after you told Cam you'd seen smoke coming from under the door of the locked room.

Two bullies attacked a little boy in your school six months after you ran to your teacher, saying someone was hurt in the stairs. We convinced the principal to install a security camera there. Your teacher got to the child just before he fell down the steps.

A woman broke into the zoo when you were a child and attacked a lot of the animals there. You knew that, somehow, and you told your father to look for the tiger's tail. The police found the woman's tooth, and she confessed.

Your sister overheard you talking in your sleep one night, that your father and one of your uncles were going to have a terrible argument. A fight that would tear the family apart. Your parents moved out just days later.

And then, last week, sweetheart, you left a message on my phone. Here...

Gramma held out her phone, and I took it from her.

I was shaking. My thoughts were a mass of chaos, chasing each other, screaming wordlessly. My mouth was painfully dry, and I couldn't swallow past the lump in my throat. My heart was a drum in my ears. Very dimly, I could hear a high-pitched keening, like someone screaming. Maybe it was my mind, rebelling at what I'd just heard. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe it was everything. Because the keening burst from my throat in a roar of horror and disbelief when I looked at my Gramma's phone.

It was a selfie of me holding up one of my sketches. I remembered sending her that picture, very proud of the mountain scene I'd worked for days over. But it was not a peaceful river valley I'd drawn at all. It was Gramma's living room, done up in Christmas decorations with the tree in the background, and fairy-lights everywhere. In the foreground was my family. My parents, sister, brothers, uncles, aunts and Gramma—on the floor. Their throats slashed open. Their eyes staring sightlessly forward. And there stood I, in the middle of those bodies, smiling serenely, blood on the knife in my hand, blood dripping down to my white dress from my mouth.

I broke the phone.

This is part two of "Storm Child", to be serialised here on Star Literature.

Sarazeen Saif Ahana is an adjunct member of the faculty at Independent University, Bangladesh where she teaches English and has a small cult of friends similarly obsessed with genre fiction.



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

And then I realised you hadn't cried.

You were lying there, in those towels, ashen-faced and as silent as the grave. This tiny, beautiful little angel. And beside you was your mother, bleeding her life away.

I held you in one arm and her in the other, and I stared out of the window into that hurricane, and I begged for your lives. You know I was never very religious, but I guess there comes a point in every person's life where you give up trying to be strong and just want some higher power to help you. I cried like a madwoman and I begged for the lives of my daughter and granddaughter, whatever the cost.

I do not know how long I stayed that way. I do not remember what I offered for your lives. It did not matter. As long as my family was safe

was home. We took you and your mother to the hospital because you were premature, and I was still worried about the blood your mom had lost. You were both released from the hospital a few weeks later, safe and healthy.

Yet every time I looked at you, I knew. I knew I'd done something terrible. I knew I'd called on something I did not even understand in my desperation to protect you and your mother. And I knew, if I were to keep you safe, everyone had to be aware. I sat them around the dining table and told everyone clearly what had happened. We swore to keep this secret. We locked the door of the room you were born in, and we agreed never to let you in there.

When your little brother was born a year later (normally, thank goodness, in a bright hospital full of doctors and nurses), we waited until he

POETRY

Omniscient

H. AZAD

Skin sticky with perspiration from a long month of June
I sit in the ruins of half of this year that has left
I am a ghost, fuzzy and melted down to a whirlpool
Passing through walls of people that walk, waltz, run, or crash into me as I drift Like a bus with its rotating wheels akin to Bambi's flailing legs
I know anger like they know grief
Watching kids grow into these fleshy bits, lanky limbs
They grieve the death of kids that they once loved

It's tragic/ but see, change is beautiful
As long as you grow as you change
Two sides of a same coin to represent it that would let you grow/ or not Cause when a thing doesn't grow, it starts to rot
I know rotten people/ I know lack of consideration
I know entitlement and lack of reciprocation
I know things you put up in a shelf for later/ just so that it doesn't seep into your skin, from some three to four millimeters under
I know that your words meant for me are sharp and that you don't mean for them to be but I know compassion
And I know what's it like to keep a secret because I know when the heart of a friend who lives thousands of miles away flutters

And I know when a friend who lives close presses across her bony wrist the sharp blade of a cutter

I know of women close to me staying in loveless contracts/ and that they didn't bump into a door when they talk about bumping into one as a response to the burning question/ they say it doesn't really matter

And I know of infidelity that sinks its claws into a ripe chest filled with love only to hollow it out into the gutter
I know know know know
All I do is know things
Things/secrets that float into my ears like razored confetti and make them bleed And I hear the honeyed words that do nothing to soothe the grating feeling of the omniscience that for the longest time I have fathered
You know how to handle things so well, very reliable

Lips splitting in two/in false gratitude/as something inside me screams I left people to bleed because it's simply not my battle to win
And then as it dies down, a small voice in the back of my mind mutters The less I know, oh, the less I know the better

H. Azad is a poet from Central Dhaka. They deal with themes of grief and gore, and they do hope to walk readers through it with them one day, rather than just holding the readers' chins and forcing them to stare it in the face. Find them on Instagram @qo2375.

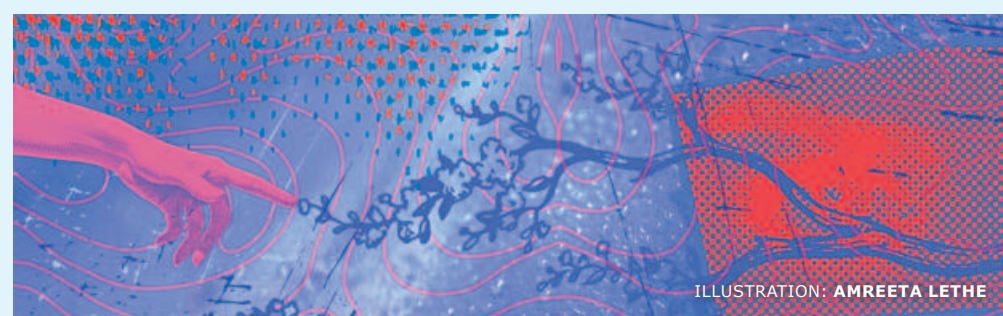


ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE



All that I shouldn't have known

DESIGN: AMREETA LETHE

MAISHA SYEDA

What I wish I didn't know is that when your dear friends whisper the word "psycho" behind your back, you'll grow up accepting it. / I wish I didn't know that cats sometimes eat their newborns for nutrients and that human beings sometimes kill their daughters when they are born; that, I wish I knew why. / I wish I didn't have to know that parents grow old and at some point, we're meant to take care of the child version of them and not the other way around. / I wish it didn't know that would make me angry (don't ask me why). / I wish I didn't know that when you don't have a parent, everyone tries to be your missing parent; they would somehow know what's best for you even though they were never around and they hardly know you; and would point out all the ways your missing parent failed to "parent the right way" because they were away most of the time (figuratively or literally). But what they don't know is that your missing parent taught you everything you needed to know to survive before they went missing—either themselves or by being away. Regardless, you turned out great. / But, I really wish I didn't have to know what it's like to be in what is now half of what was once a beautiful and happy home.

I wish I didn't know that beautiful flowers wither sometimes even after a rainy day. / And that some of those magnificent looking flowers stink—because, well, what a waste. / And I wish I didn't know that when you give up yourself to make a home in the palm of someone's hands, your home is bound to wash away. And you'll end up trying to build that same home forever.

Maisha Syeda is a writer, painter, and lecturer at North South University.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

POETRY

All that I'd despicably known / Things I wish I didn't know

TABASSUM HASNAT

All that I'd despicably known / Things I wish I didn't know—

That my childhood would be a prelude to the calamitous chronicles of this adulthood.

That the then enticing eagerness to grow up would become today, one nonchalant noose around my adult self.

That the melodies my younger self mindlessly hummed and cavorted about, would become so hard to even call to mind as I manoeuvred through life.

That the embers of curiosity once coruscating through my mind would be extinguished by the everlasting bouts of over-scrutinising.

That the heart that used to pulsate a few beats harder in wonderment of the world would become hardened to the ways of that very world.

That my favourite person who breathes at the core of all my tenderest tales of life, would become a stranger one day with the bitterest aftertaste in my mind.

That the opportunity I spend my whole life looking for,

would knock upon my threshold as if a trouvaile in the middle of some random day—

only to slip off my fingers, emulating the classic trope of "almost" from movies and novels.

That I'd inevitably become a daughter drinking from my mother's fountain of sorrow, onboarding the selfsame passengers of pain, putting upon pedestals the parasites that have only known to dine on the dainty life I hold.

That grief would always find its way to me, even in moments of grave bliss, even amidst bustling crowds, even in the arms—of my loved ones, even when the light at the end of the tunnel seemed unblemished and brilliant.

That to be able to crusade against the travails of the world outside, would require me to cease being at a war with my insides.

That the unloved, crestfallen whiff of the little girl from my childhood would still tantalisingly, wheeze out her dearth of tenderness in my instances of lovingness, leaving them marred.

That all the love every thread of my being retained, after being poured into the heart of a wrong person, would render me incapacitated of loving—a terrible lover, is all I must have become now.

That all the wrong trains do not end up at right stations,

for here I am—pursuing pursuits yet to make sense to myself, chasing chaos in the name of having purposes,

checking myself in at starting points only with no finishing lines in sight.

That the fairytales I grew up reading before my stubborn eye gave in to sweet slumber would grow edges like knives becoming anecdotes of detestable realities that keep rewinding behind the same eyes leaving me now sleepless.

That the girl who only walked holding her father's pinky, would become a woman dragging her way through her life with fists clenched.

That loving myself is something I needed to learn everyday for the world makes me abominate my own skin every other day.

That my words would fail me, as mortals become unkind, and life—a running radio of grating malice, and as I write this unending list of all that I'd despicably known.

Tabassum Hasnat is a Bangladeshi freelance content and creative writer of short form/fictional genres. Aside from having her own personal blog on the global platform of Storymirror Pvt Ltd, she has co authored multiple anthologies and book compilations that have been published on Amazon, Kindle, Google books, Kobo, Barnes & Noble, and Notion Press.