



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

CREATIVE NONFICTION

The tall and short of it

My face burned with shame and regret as I remembered how, as a tactless child, I often asked her why she didn't wear it the more "proper" way like my other grandmother did, with its many crisp pleats in silks and chiffon.

MONTAHA ABSAR

It feels like only two days ago that my dadu was still here, worrying I'd always be too short like her. I would have to find a man of reasonable height, she would say, not so tall that he towers over me like a monster but tall enough to complement me. *I may have found one, dadu*, I want to tell her. A man who stands solid and sure, like support beams that hold up damaged ceilings to keep them from caving. I don't know how long he can bear to stick around but I would like to tell her about him. And about all the things that have happened in my life since she left. But we never spoke much. And so everytime I think of her, I am reminded of my father. Of a man solid and sure. The man she raised. My father, her child.

They always say such poetic things about death but they never tell you about the way it looks on your father. Not just viscerally, but physically, biologically, permanently. At about five foot and eleven inches, my father is a much taller man. But his mother's death took about an inch and a half off of his own height. And while I never

saw him cry, not once since her death, I did watch him shrink a little shorter. I watched it happen as he headed for the airport to Chittagong, where my dadu lived all her life and left only in death, and then almost imperceptibly more each time he spoke of her in the past tense.

If the pain of losing someone was temporary, how can it alter your biological makeup? My dadu had lost a child, a husband, her own parents, and everyone she grew up with by the time of her own passing. Maybe that's why she was so short. Maybe that's why older people start to hunch over, their backs curving like the sagging branches of ancient banyan trees, not just with age but with the added weight of all the losses they've had to bear.

I did not have to see my father cry to know his loss. The language of grief is spoken in many dialects. Sometimes it manifests into a silent longing too painful to be kept to oneself, which is how I imagine my father felt one morning at 2 AM several months after her death, when he texted me a photo of his mother, her soft smile radiating even through the dim light of my

screen. She was in a simple cotton saree, threads slightly frayed at the edges where countless folds had been lovingly worn, loosely draped in the Bangali "ek pech", the way she wore it all her life. No words accompanied the photo.

My face burned with shame and regret as I remembered how, as a tactless child, I often asked her why she didn't wear it the more "proper" way like my other grandmother did, with its many crisp pleats in silks and chiffon. To which she would simply smile and say, "This is how I've always worn it and this is how I like it." She never spoke without her smile, soft and warm, yet unperturbed. There was conviction in her kindness. For a woman supposedly so simple, who received no formal education and saw little of the world outside of the courtyard of her village home where she raised six children, she was always solid and sure of her beliefs.

Maybe softness and grace does not weaken our sense of self but empowers it. And though I feel I did not inherit the best of her, I already find myself reaching for cotton sarrees over silk. Perhaps amends to those who are no

longer here can still be made in the ways we choose to live our lives. In microscopic ways, I pay silent homage to a woman I never got to appreciate enough. In persistent attempts to fuse kindness with conviction and in always offering a smile, even when it's the furthest thing from my mind, I remember her. Perhaps especially then.

It was over two years ago now, almost three. But every bad thing that ever happens somehow simultaneously feels like it happened two days ago and also as though light years have passed between each event. And in the years since, I have made no other profound realisations about life and loss other than—it keeps happening. And I am never quite on the other side of grief. Instead, I feel like Ratan from *The Postmaster*, going around in circles around the post office while one by one, people keep sailing away on a boat, forever.

Today, I'm much taller than my dadu ever was and know I will remain much shorter than my father is. Yet with every person that walks out of my life, I imagine myself changing a little on the outside, like subtle biological

testimonies of the love and loss I've endured. Perhaps a wrinkle near my mouth as a reminder of the laughter we shared or a couple of new grey hairs to join those existing. Maybe that's why people dye their hair or get new piercings or move to a different city or change something consequential about themselves after losing a loved one. Because we worry this loss will begin to show externally, taking a life of its own and haunting us like the ghosts of our loved ones past.

But I suppose it makes me a little happy too. Because everyone already tells me my smile resembles hers. So maybe one day in the future, we will be of the same height. And I will know of the same losses as she did—the ones that are born out of loving and living and knowing people.

And perhaps then I will understand why she was so worried about me not being taller to begin with.

Montaha Absar is a writer from Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her work is primarily centred on the intersection between literature, theory, and intimate, personal reflections.

POETRY

CARPE DIEM

TAWSIF MAHMUD

Latin,'seize the day!', a quotation from Horace (Odes Ixi).

but i can't. i cannot be bothered to find meaning behind the faults in my father's eyes, i cannot begin to note down the anger's temperature rising from my brother's scalp. i cannot seize what must hurt me to be, be remorseful of the void that strikes me with grief

seize the day; it is for the old & rich to say, filled to the brim with their foamy beers and rustic cigarette stained teeth, i for one cannot will myself to be anything but miserable, to be able to seize anything but the emissary of misery by the throat, but even then, what can one do at the face of their greatest trauma? carpe diem is for the movies, for those who are cursed with a greater purpose, not for those such as myself, for i am cursed with achieving what i carry; the unbridled weight of the coffin i must marry.

Tawsif Mahmud is the author of the poetry collection Poetry & Poison. He refers to himself as the poet of misery, and writes poems that could be felt by many others. He also performs in Slam Poetry Nights.

POETRY

Birth of a Poem

REBECCA HAQUE

Hark!

Busy work of Hands, (cooking and cleaning) leaves my mind free to embroider a tapestry of thoughts and emotions, to breed words into a patterned piece. A Title is Born. (but me, weird Night-Owl, needs Nightfall to weave the Babe in electric Wool)

Rebecca Haque is Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka.

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