



PHOTO: COLLECTED

## FICTION

## Back in the old house

**Only when ma fell sick, and I had to take a indefinite leave of absence from work to take care of her, did I become privy to my mother's hopes and dreams. I am ashamed to say that even after spending 17 solitary years with ma, I never for once paused to think who ma was as a person, much less ask her.**

SAJAL HOSSAIN DHALY

I was raised in the old country, back in the old house where all my siblings had grown up long before I was born. It was a family house but lacked all the familiarity, for none of us ever felt quite at home, least of all me. My earliest memories back in that house coincide with memories of being taught cuss words by my immediate older brother, watching TV with my father in the living room—with me seated on the floor with my legs crossed, him almost passed out on the sofa hungover—and my memories of my mother hand feeding me bhaat. I remember next to nothing besides these facts from the old house where I was raised. I was 7 when we moved out. Not all of us moved out exactly. Mother moved out after filing a divorce. She endured 23 years of that marriage, but it was finally time to move on. But of course, not everybody was ready to move on. All three of my brothers decided to stay back with baba. Them already having developed much of their functional brains, they thought the agency to make that decision was a gift they had, which I did not, as I decided to leave with ma. When they first heard I chose ma, they became incredulous and animated. "Why would you throw your life away like that?" "Ma is abandoning us! Why are you going with her?" "I expected you to be smarter than this." But nobody ever asked me why I wanted to leave baba, why I wanted to be far away from him. My siblings thought the age of 7 was too little for one to make a logical, informed decision. They thought I chose ma for the virtue of my gender. They thought I chose her because I was the youngest and thus received the most of our shared mother's love and affection.

The reason why ma wanted to leave baba was apparent. Not only us siblings, but it was clear as day even to our close relatives and even neighbors. The first 7 years of my life I had grown up amongst the cacophony of shouting, clattering of breaking ceramic and glass, slamming of doors; hidden between these cacophonies were the whimpering of my siblings as we hid beneath our study tables or inside our wardrobes, afraid to fall in baba's crosshairs during these lengthy tirades. In these moments, now I realise as an adult, we had failed ma. I don't know about my siblings,

but I have grown conscious of betrayal towards my mother. We abandoned her, all four of us siblings, to save our skin. To stay neutral in baba's eyes. To stay away from his warpath. And in doing so, we sacrificed our mother to the wolf.

As to the reality of my decision at the age of seven, I have no personal recollection of it. Why exactly did I choose ma over baba, when all three of my siblings chose otherwise, I do not remember. I can tell you now that it was the right thing to do and so I did it, but did the seven-year-old me think so too? Or did she want to stay with her mother? Or did she merely want to escape baba? I remember one thing for certain, I was betraying baba forever, and our relationship would be strained irrevocably—which it has been, maybe for the better.

Only when ma fell sick, and I had to take a indefinite leave of absence from work to take care of her, did I become privy to my mother's hopes and dreams. I am ashamed to say that even after spending 17 solitary years with ma, I never for once paused to think who ma was as a person, much less ask her. It was only when she thought she was on her deathbed did she deem it important enough to impart some of her childhood aspirations to someone. She had gone blind in both eyes by then, diabetes—which soon gave way to glaucoma—had done its thing. She used to be in a trance most hours of the day in those days, rambling on about having to do the housework, cook, do the dishes. In one of these reveries she one day told me about missing her childhood friends—Sumi, Khadija, Chadni, her closest friends growing up. She talked about missing playing with them, wearing only their tiger striped shorts, around Sir Salimullah Medical College Mitford Hospital, playing Bangladeshi renditions of tag and hide and seek. She reminisced about those days, long before the '71 war, long before her marriage, long before leaving her home in older Dacca, to live down south with baba.

I listened to these stories attentively. My words of affirmation and questions would fall on deaf ears, as she would keep blabbering as if I was not there, continuing her story to a third, silent listener whom I could not see. Perhaps it was god himself, perhaps the devil had come to take her; maybe it was the ghosts of her friends who had come to comfort her in her

final moments. She talked fondly of her three friends, until her forehead creased into a frown and she remembered how Chadni was the first to be lost to marriage. A balding businessman in northern Dhaka had claimed Chadni. Similarly, the other two girls fell too, though I could not tell clearly to what circumstances because by then ma's words were unintelligible. She talked like this to herself until her final breath, lodged in her hospital bed snugly. No one who saw her could say that she was in any sort of pain or distress. She looked like an angel whose wings were clipped and then chose to just snuggle up in a bed contentedly. Before her last breaths she did talk about wanting to learn crafting with jute and sell them at melas. She was extremely fond of melas she used to tell me. So I was able to connect the dots. By this point she was completely catatonic, saying single words in single syllables with long pauses between each. I remember the words bangles, teep, shari, mela, nagordola, mela, ma, phool, bangles, mela, before she stopped talking and breathing. By this point I was a mess and the doctors ushered me out of the cabin to take her off life support.

Ma was also a young girl once. Just as I was seven with hopes and dreams, going to school wanting to accomplish them, ma was also a young girl filled to the brim with aspirations to change the world. Had she lived those dreams, her stalls at melas would not have changed the world exactly, but they would have changed lives. Her hand woven baskets and accessories with jute could have lit up the eyes of a wife. The bangles she procured from different vendors could have changed the trajectory of a relationship, one where a man was buying churi for his distant lover, saving up gifts for when they inevitably meet after a long time. Her teep could have found its place on the forehead of a village bride, making her shine like the moon. Ma could have changed lives, and those people could have gone on to change the world, thus making ma someone who could have shaped the world I live in today. She was also a child one day before being wed to baba, before moving into the old house. She was also a child.

Sajal Hossain Dhaly is a student of BRAC University, majoring in Literature.

## POETRY

## Across life

SNIGDHA DEY

She told me in her last visit—  
"Hold on to hope, my child.  
Even beneath the deepest of forests,  
A few pieces of sun fall.  
If you ever feel the world around you eroding  
Into oceanic darkness,  
You shall hold on to hope, my dear.  
Drifting over the raft of night,  
Daylight returns each time.  
You must hold on to hope, my dear child."  
Tonight, as I take  
The final steps of my life,  
Her presence accompanies  
Me until the end of the path.

**Snigdha Dey** is a first-year English Honours student. She can be reached at s90967474@gmail.com.



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

## POETRY

## Barenness

SURAYA AKTER

Beneath the ocean of a cave  
Are you not born with barenness?  
From a cave of grace, a warm sphere  
Barefoot, barehanded, and barely clothed.  
O man, decline the desert flowers.  
Before you disgrace your cave  
Are you not born with barenness?  
Now, you wander through a storm of deserts.

**Suraya Akter** is a student at North South University majoring in English literature.



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

**Khero Khata**

Khero Khata is Star Books and Literature's writing corner, where we post prompts soliciting submissions in the form of flash fiction and poetry. Selected pieces will be published in print and/or online.

**This month's prompt:**

**Headlines**

Email us your submissions (500 words) at [dsliteditor@gmail.com](mailto:dsliteditor@gmail.com) by March 28, 2025.

## POETRY

## A home for her homeless heart

PURBITA DAS

Having jotted down the iambic stanzas on the chopping board and collected the veggies alive from the realms of metaphors that smell the labor of her regular gardening records;

She places some candles at the heart of her living room where her lost lullabies take some deep breaths to start their days.

Morning, evening, night—  
There is this ode to life that she reads out to every bird dropping off to her apartment like paying guests who only join the sleepers' compartment.

A symphonic cassette of poetry murmuring through the twigs of her well-groomed plants and their grandchildren love their master's presence and pressure to bloom like a mature sunshade tent in where

she can take the pen and paper to turn the blues of her life into some tolerable features in yellow colors.

Everywhere you take a look—

You come across the sensation of her year built suppressed wishes and paradoxical desires

to be dead among the worst interpreters of life.

This is where the good music of her gone days are preserved forever.

This is where she plays the piano of her mind like a maestro does in between the breaks of a



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

terribly beautiful war.

This is where she would live with the love of her life so that no one knows the location of their happily ever after.

**Purbita Das** is doing her post graduation in Applied Linguistics and ELT at the University of Dhaka.