



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

CREATIVE NONFICTION

# To fold a city into silence

**I blinked and he was gone. There were slow murmurs and loud screams ahead translating to rebellious chants. I looked around and an elderly woman called me into her house. I went inside to find at least 20 young girls and boys hiding there.**

OHONA ANJUM

The bus stop was empty as usual, I sat waiting for a sight of one. Then he came. A man in a faded red shirt with a bag hanging on his back, running as if the devil himself had taken out a lease on his shadow. He collapsed onto the bench beside me, his sweat sharp, anxious with the fear of a hundred things. Before I could speak, the gunshot cracked the air, a sound so loud it wasn't sound at all, rather a rupture, a tear in the fabric of the ordinary day I planned to have but my body knew before my mind: this was not a day for buses.

Where—? I started, staring at his face. Wide, liquid, the eyes of a man who had just seen history rewrite itself in blood.

"My friend is dead," he said, and in his voice was the quiet fury of the unexceptional, the way people here learned to say such things without

flinching.

Down the road, a pack of boys moved like a single organism, they had wooden sticks raised above their heads like they tied an invisible flag to it. That would protect them, stand with them in need. They were young, too young, but their faces were old with the knowledge of what sticks could do when rains of bullets chased them. Around us, the street folded in on itself, the shopkeepers yanked down corrugated shutters, mothers dragged children inside by their wrists, a stray dog trotted past, ribs heaving.

I should have run. But the body is a stubborn thing; mine stayed rooted, as if my bones had turned to stone. Only when the second shot rang out closer now, a punctuation mark to some unspeakable sentence, did my hands move of their own accord. I held my bag to my chest for the newest fear of bullets.

I did not know where to go. The

street had become a living thing, recoiling. The shutters slammed down over market stalls, their metallic shrieks cutting through the heat. Cars and motorcycles stood abandoned, their engines burning gasoline into air, their riders vanished into the cracks of the city. The July sun hung low and white like a merciless witness. But no crueller than this day, or the silence that followed each gunshot, it was its own kind of violence.

The rickshaw driver's eyes met mine. He did not ask where I needed to go. There was only one direction now: away.

His legs pedalled through the unknown corners of the city I had lived in all my life, which I called my city. In that moment, I no longer recognised it. We slipped through alleyways so narrow the rickshaw's wheels grazed the walls, scraping off flakes of old propaganda posters. Vote for Progress, one fragment read, clinging to the brick. The buildings here leaned into

one another with balconies so close a neighbour could pass a cup of sugar or a curse across the gap without stretching. Those windows were sealed shut, yet I felt eyes tracking us with the weight of held breaths.

I gripped my bag tighter. Inside it was a wallet, a half-finished novel, my student ID, and a tube of lipstick. Ordinary things. Useless things. The rickshaw lurched around a corner, and for a dizzying second, I saw my own face reflected in a darkened shop window, wide-eyed, mouth slightly open, a portrait of a woman who had just learned how quickly a day could unravel.

The terror did not fade. It only changed shape. From the sharp scream of bullets to this: the slow, sickening realisation that the streets I'd walked blindfolded as a child were now a maze with no exit. The driver hunched over the handles, his shoulders sharp as blades. He knew these turns, these

shadows. I wondered if he, too, was counting the gunshots in his head, measuring the distance between each one like the spaces between heartbeats.

He left me in a distant alley, saying, "May God's mercy be upon you."

I blinked and he was gone. There were slow murmurs and loud screams ahead translating to rebellious chants. I looked around and an elderly woman called me into her house. I went inside to find at least 20 young girls and boys hiding there.

The woman bolted the door behind me. Outside, hour by hour the chants swelled, like a tide against the shore. Gunshots were faster than the blinking of eyes. Inside, we were silent. Waiting. The walls felt as thin as parchment that trembled with every shout. I thought of the rickshaw driver's prayer. Mercy, from this day forward, was going to be a currency out of circulation.

Ohona Anjum writes, rhymes, and studies English Literature.

POETRY  
BY IFTEHAZ YEASIR IFTEE

## July 18

Do you remember the sunset on the 18th of July? What colour was it? Orange? Red? Violet perhaps? Or was it a simple hue of blue? I have asked the birds for an answer; they say they didn't fly that day. The thrashing movement of the copters, the buzzing sound of the flaps, the smoke from the tear gas has not let them fly in the sky. So, when, in the pursuit of an answer, I ask the birds, I get no reply.

## Run

Myriads of legs marching. Hand in hand. Firework of slogans. Broad daylight or silent night. Goons and guns. Velocity of bullets. A broken skull. An unmoved body. A hasty run. How many days shall it continue? How much more to run? I have run a mile more with everyone else, and I shall keep running. Unknowing of what to expect next, careless of what is coming.

## One of them

Every now and then, I shift the curtains of my room and pretend That I am not inside my house. And that I have no proof of the thousands of murders committed, That I have not seen with my two eyes how defeated The children of my country are. I pretend that I know no green and red flag That has been reddened with the blood gushing from Mughdho's skull. And I pretend to fool myself and play ignorant To the hundreds more they enforcefully disappeared. When I walk, I carry a smile I borrowed from an innocent child playing in a field, Who equals me in not knowing anything. But the heavens and oceans know, I know it all, I have known it all since the very beginning. But when I tread on the corrupted streets, I tread defying my knowledge.



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Because I am one of them. And I must survive.

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FICTION

# Echoes through THE BALCONY

SAMARA SUBAITA

Saiyara didn't wave a flag to voice her rights on the streets. She had never marched in a protest line, never chanted beneath the dark blanket of smoke-heavy skies. Her revolution was quieter, and it carried a little soul swaddled in a bassinet beside her, traces of milk on her lips and dreaming eyes. Her days were soft and stitched with lullabies. Three months ago, she gave birth to a beautiful daughter, Layl, meaning "night" in Arabic, inspired by her quiet prayers during a power cut, lit by candlelight and hope. This was a new beginning for her.

That July afternoon, as the city began unravelling in slow, furious rage, she stood barefoot on the marble-tiled balcony of building 57. The sun was beginning to bend towards the west. The sky above Narayanganj churned and bellowed in hues of smoke bombs and shots. Helicopters circled the air like vultures made of steel, orbiting over houses as if waiting for death.

Saiyara wasn't watching the chaos; she was absorbed in watching the wind, the way it carried dust and the history we were to make. She looked up at the sky, tracing the skyline with her eyes like a silent prayer, unaware of

the grief that would befall on the joy of her motherhood. "Maa," she called inside. "It's getting louder by the minute."

No answer from the kitchen. Inside, her mother washed the rice for lunch with shivering hands. A flash of a red dupatta fluttered on a rooftop in a building across the street.

Then it came. Not a bang. Not a warning. A rupture in the sky. Something crueller.

A bullet sliced through the iron grill like it was meant for Saiyara. It passed through her skull. Her knees gave out first. Then the silence. It did not pause to consider the cries, the innocence, the milk contained for the child or the lullabies waiting to be sung.

She collapsed without a cry, her body folding around her daughter's cradle, imitating a final act of a mother protecting her child.

Layl did not cry. Not until her grandmother broke down in tears. The men who walked in later said it was a stray bullet. As if the violence had no master.

As if the weapon had just departed without a destination.

Saiyara was not collateral. She, like many, was not an item in a line of someone's spreadsheet of unrest.

She was a mother. A daughter. A breathing vessel of stories that may never unfold.

The balcony stands still today. The iron grill carries the same dent the bullet hole had imprinted on it, like a dark eye watching people walk on the street beneath it. The concrete wall has been repainted, but it peels off every monsoon, like grief refusing to be silenced.

Layl is a year older today—hardly walking, babbling half words like ma and dada. She does not understand death yet, but she understands absence.

She traces her grandmother's face for someone she cannot name and sometimes hums to the wind like it might carry her lullabies back.

Today, she does not speak of protest. But one day, she will.

And when she does, her voice will be of inheritance.

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