



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

FICTION

The dawn's return

She was the morning.

Gentle, at first. Sweetness and warmth and a little bit of laziness. You turn and you wonder why you ever wanted the night to end, for the light to return. Yet she is here already, and her voice cannot be denied. The world of the living calls through her words, so you rise and reenter life, and she is beside you, the sun itself in all her splendour.

SARAZEEN SAIF AHANA

Long, long ago, when the world was younger, wiser, softer, when the animals were braver and the people were gentler, when art lived and music sailed, and the skies were a true, honest blue, there lived a man who loved a woman, and they lived in a little house they loved very much. How they met or how they loved is not important. What is important is this: their love was real and true, and it flourished.

The little house they lived and loved in was set in a tiny village in a tiny kingdom by the big, blue sea, and the blue enormity of the ocean was dwarfed by the red enormity of their love.

Yet this world—though younger and gentler and more loving than ours—remained real, and one day, the woman passed away into the ether and left her love behind. The man watched her fade, and though it tore his heart out, he let her go, for he knew she would find no peace until he did.

But what of his own peace? He had none without her.

When she was gone and he was alone, he walked and walked and he walked some more. He walked until his feet no longer knew where they were going. The world had blurred into one unbroken ache, until suddenly the ground beneath him softened, and the whisper of waves reached his ears. He looked up and realised—he had come to the sea.

It was night, the first night without her, and everything around him carried the same hush of mourning. The sky stretched vast above, black and glittering with a thousand cold fires. Yet when he lowered his gaze, he saw no difference. The sea had stilled, vast and patient, and it wore the sky like a second skin. Stars trembled on its surface as though the heavens had fallen down and shattered upon the water. He could not tell where the firmament ended and the ocean began; the world had folded in upon itself, so that he stood at the edge of an infinity doubled.

He sat on the sandy shore of the great blue, and he watched the blue of the sky meet the blue of the water. The two worlds of blue met and mingled, as old lovers do—comfortably, gently, tiredly but happily. The man sighed

and felt a twinge of envy, for the sky and the water would merge and then separate, and then come back together again. Yet his own love never would.

"Why do you weep, mortal man?" the sea asked him in her breathy voice. "The world is great and beautiful."

The man smiled. "Yes, it was."

"Was?"

"Not for me. Not anymore. Not without her."

"Ah." There was a soft silence, like the cool darkness that comes over you when you lie down in search of comfort after a day of troubles. The sea spoke again, her voice now salt-rough: "Tell me of her."

The man smiled again. "Even you, vast and blue as you are, do not have the ability to comprehend one as such as her."

The sea laughed gently. "Perhaps. But tell me anyway."

So he began: "She was the dawn, long-awaited and prayed for, dreamed of and ached for—yet always a surprise when the hint of the sun's brilliant rim first peeks over the horizon, and you feel all the breath rush from your lungs. You watch as the sun rises, as it has every day for uncounted days, yet every day is a miracle. You watch the dawn, you watch the sky come back to life, you watch the world awaken in heat and sun and power, but you realise... this is all the proof you need of God."

"She was the morning. Gentle, at first. Sweetness and warmth and a little bit of laziness. You turn and you wonder why you ever wanted the night to end, for the light to return. Yet she is here already, and her voice cannot be denied. The world of the living calls through her words, so you rise and reenter life, and she is beside you, the sun itself in all her splendour."

"She was the noon. Blazing, burning, brilliant. Too hot to touch, scorching those who dare, her rage a terrible fire, her heat you would endure... and wonder if you would survive. Yet it was this very heat that made life possible. For the tides to turn, for the moon to live, for the great fires and smokes and bangs of the human race. And she is beside you still, the sun in all her splendour."

"She was the afternoon. Her radiance

slightly dimmed, made gentler. More playful. She would let the sky breathe again, let the blue waters laugh and play, and the clouds dance as they craft their paintings in the canvas of the firmament. The children were run from their cages, free at last to let all of nature hear their voices, their screams and shouts and laughs and jokes and joy and joy and joy. And she is beside you still, the sun in all her splendour.

"She was the evening. Purple, Green, Violet. Black. Even pink, sometimes, if the mood is right and the light is allowed to show off its infinite variety. She is calm, restful. The day was long and hard, and full of fire, but the coals have simmered down to a softer orange now, and she allows you to simply be. A seat by the window, the glass slightly fogged by age. A cup of tea on the sill, and the angry old alley-cat now slinks in through the door to curl up in your lap, accepting love for the first time. And she is beside you still, the sun in all her splendour."

"She was the night. Dark. Black. Dangerous. Full of fear, full of horror, full of the great, vast, unknown. Depthless, and endless, and cursed. Eyes in the dark. Fangs in the dark. Claws in the dark. Yet the darkness of rest, of sleep, of comfort and love and hidden laughter. And she is no longer beside you, the sun in all her lost splendour."

The man fell silent at last.

The sea listened to every word, her heart fuller than she could've imagined. "Tell me, then, mortal man—why do you cry?"

"Because she is gone, and I am alone."

The sea smiled now, her voice now tidal-slow. "No, mortal man. She was, as you say, the sun. The sun must set, for that is the law. Yet the law also says, the dawn must return."

And the man, startled, looked up.

And there, over the horizon, the sun was rising.

Sarazeen Saif Ahana is an adjunct member of the faculty at Independent University, Bangladesh and Southeast University, where she teaches English and hopes her students will one day understand the light they bring to her life.

POETRY

The fire that has no shape

BIPRA PRASUN DAS

What do you carry in your heart's bundle?

A lineage?

A doctrine?

A fear?

Cast them into the fire—

that has no shape,

but still gives light.

There is a music that unbinds.

Not heard by ears,

but by the aching in your marrow.

It is sung by those who have shed skin

after skin,

until only breath remained,

hovering between two worlds—

neither dead,

nor alive,

only becoming.

The divine does not wear a crown,

nor sit upon a throne.

It stirs

where your silence deepens beyond thought,

where your hands tremble

before a stranger's wound.

It flickers

in the sweat of labour,

in the tear withheld for dignity's sake.

It hums

in the cracked voice of longing,

in the tremor

before you choose love again.

It is not far.

It leans close

where you kneel in grief,

where you dance without name,

where you burn,

and still offer light.

So do not call me brother by blood,

nor enemy by script.

Call me by the soundless name

we shared

before the stars spoke of our fates.

That name still glows

in the ashes of your forgetting.

Come.

Unrobe your mind.

Let the fire take your shape.

And in its smoke,

you may see the formless Beloved

smiling back—

as you.

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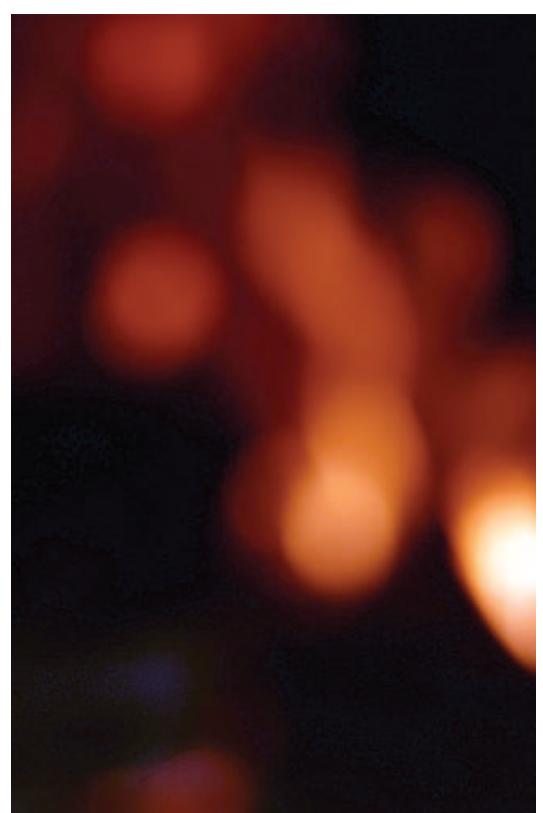


PHOTO: MAISHA SYEDA

CREATIVE NONFICTION

A visit before the journey

FARUK KADER

Before returning to Australia, I felt a quiet urgency to visit my elderly and ailing relatives in Dhaka. Not just a social obligation—it was something deeper, a whisper from within. I heard such visits were acts of virtue, but for me, it was more about connection, memory, and respect.

A few days ago, I went to Katasur to see an elderly aunt recovering from Chikungunya. Now, after many years, I'm heading to Ruppur to visit another aunt, 85 years old and frail from age. As our rented car made its way through the city's chaotic landscape, I tried to find my aunt's address on Google Maps. Synthia, my companion, teased me: "You came here in 2018. Don't you remember the route to her house?"

But Dhaka is a city that sheds its skin every few years. After seven or eight years, even Ruppur, located at the furthest corner of the city, felt foreign now. Thankfully, our driver, Hasan, had no trouble finding the place.

Back in 2018, I brought my mother to visit this same aunt. My mother, then in her twilight years, had been eager to

reconnect with family. I remembered the two women chatting warmly on the sofa, their conversation flowing like a river of shared memories. Today, things were different. The aunt lay in her dim bedroom, curtains drawn, and the air heavy with gloom. Her face bore the unmistakable marks of time—missing teeth, sunken cheeks, and she looked like a jaded black-and-white photograph, framed by age. She loved watching cricket on TV...no more. I noticed on her bed a religious text, now the only means to spend her idle time.

I sat on a wooden stool close to her bed, unsure what to say. Should I ask about her health? Her medications? Instead, I asked gently, "Do you remember when I came with my mother?" Her face lit up. She hadn't forgotten. It felt like a bridge across time.

Her voice was hardly audible, but she wanted to speak. I, now hard of hearing myself, relied on Synthia to interpret. She sat beside her on the bed, translating the aunt's murmurs with care.

Back then, the aunt's youngest son, Faisal, had been there too. He fetched Dalpuri from the local restaurant to entertain me; he, for



sure, was aware of my indulgence in Dhaka street food. Faisal had been a thoughtful soul, living with his mother and caring for her. His love for books was evident—two towering bookshelves in the lounge were packed with titles by Zafar Iqbal, Edward Said, and Salman Rushdie. I wondered if I had noticed them during my last visit. Faisal passed away three months ago, claimed by a rare disease. Faisal breathed his last at a Dhaka hospital. But the news of his death was not immediately revealed to his mother.

She came to know about it as she listened to the local mosque's on-air announcement of his son's funeral arrangement. Now, Faisal's wife had taken over caring for the aunt, with help from a full-time caregiver named Rahima.

Upstairs, Faisal's elderly mother-in-law lived alone. I considered visiting her, too. I reckon, she would have been happy to receive us, even though we're distant relatives. So many elders, I thought, were quietly slipping through the gap of loneliness. Echoes from their silent heartbeats ripple through the air.

As Hasan drove us back home, I felt the weight of time and memory pressing gently on my heart. These visits aren't just about saying goodbye—they are about honouring lives, preserving stories, and offering a moment of warmth in a world that often forgets its oldest voices.

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