

FICTION

A trim reckoning



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

At home, we are graced at the door by my chotomama. Chotomama had been a ruffian in his youth. His best achievement was having a brick thrown at his face once by a thug from a rival party, which led to a scar on his forehead and promotions within the youth-wing of the party and a local fame that Chotomama milked assiduously.

SHAHRIAR SHAAMS
“What is that honour? Air. A Trim Reckoning!”
—Falstaff, *Henry IV* Part One
A dead brother is less profitable than a brother almost dead. When Reaz comes home that day with his left arm crudely bandaged and a smirk on his face, I tell our mother we may have made it. This could be our time, if we play it right. Ma tells me to stop joking around, especially now. *Has he really been shot?* Yes, Ma. Reaz acts it out. Policemen gunning down any possible protesters trying to advance to take over their station, people screaming, the lumping of bodies against one another, and a pellet grazing his arm by. The bleeding starts right away and he kneels down. A friend carries him away to a makeshift first-aid stand. A young boy in a medic’s coat hurriedly washes away the blood with some antiseptic and wraps it in gauge-tape. He returns home promptly. His part is done. He is seven years younger than me and still in college. Taller than all our family and quick to anger, if anyone among us was to join the protests of the last few weeks, naturally it had to be him. He seems built for it. Reaz’s injury, miniscule compared to the outright deaths that have been reported in the last few days,

comes on an auspicious day. The day of regime change. A despot flees in secret. Mobs break through walls of the prime-ministerial palace as law enforcement and military patrols are suspiciously absent. So many years of pent-up anger is released all of a sudden that a momentary joy takes hold. Reaz is swept by that very joy and goes out with his friends to celebrate, returning hours later not with any of the loot we see being carted out by miscreants on TV but a trophy on his body.
Ma examines his hand. “Take him to the Emergency,” she tells me, “This needs to be cleaned and bandaged properly...”
“It’s nothing,” Reaz shrugs off, but I agree with Ma. An injured hand at a protest is honourable; an amputated hand only invites pity. We rickshaw to the closest ER and wait our turn. There are severe cases on display. Seated awkwardly on the plastic in the waiting room, the smell of Fenyl overwhelming our nostrils, I feel an overwhelming urge to take a picture where I stand in focus, shielding Reaz away from the vulgarity of showing off his wound. But a record will be displayed regardless.
The intern that dutifully wraps up my brother prescribes painkillers on our receipt stub and advises an X-ray, just to be sure everything is in top-

shape. “I’m sure everything is,” she says, “But get one done if you wish to, tomorrow or soon enough.”
Reaz agrees to the picture on the rickshaw back. He understands what a special moment this is for us. Ma and I are old-school middle-classers, men and women who sweat inside public buses and complain about corruption and inflation and follow it up with a little more complaining about the protests against corruption and inflation that have now clogged up the roads and left us stranded under the sun to sweat. But Reaz—he has been adamant in joining the protests for months. Ma forbade him at first. “It is too dangerous,” she said, “We are not people for whom luck shines on. Why bother?”
“All my friends are participating,” he said.
Luckily for him, in the following few days my mother’s mood changed considerably and she managed to keep her mouth shut the first day he sneaked out. Images of hired thugs beating up people were perennially on our screens. Ma saw injuries of skin bloated into red and instead of reeling my brother in, she let him go. “Everyone is going,” she parroted his line now. She cannot be the mother that cages him at home. Revolution must succeed. Or else his friends will laugh at him.

So Ma and I had our eyes glued to our screen while Reaz smeared toothpaste over his face and chanted slogans in front of his school.
Whenever he was at home, he would be frantically texting. His WhatsApp group was perhaps one of thousands that kept the fire alight in these young teenagers. I did not expect them to care so much. I wish I cared as much. He was at the protests a few more days before the government put up a curfew. They turned the internet off so none of them could plot anything dangerous. The summer heat rebounded throughout our rooms. I could sense Reaz’s anxiety, his restlessness. We needed that break, even as so many were secretly killed during this time. We needed to understand that if this could not tame the students, then nothing would. They would easily give their own lives away to rid the government. And Reaz almost did, to our mother’s glee.
At home, we are graced at the door by my chotomama. Chotomama had been a ruffian in his youth. His best achievement was having a brick thrown at his face once by a thug from a rival party, which led to a scar on his forehead and promotions within the youth-wing of the party and a local fame that Chotomama milked assiduously. Chotomama jumps at Reaz at first sight, hugging him tight. We caution him to take care and not hurt him by mistake. The hand is still vulnerable. He waves me away, “I know what these things are like, don’t worry,” he says. “My boy!” He is all smiles at Reaz, “You proved you are my true blood!”
“Oh, can it,” Ma says, “This was a bullet, not the little pebble you got hit with back in the ‘90s!”
“A pebble! A pebble, you say? Did you forget the profuse bleeding? The ‘hau-mau’ you were doing! Remember this scene, Reaz! When time passes, people forget your sacrifice...”
On the contrary, Ma, hell bent on becoming the next Jahanara Imam, will never be forgetting this. “How do you know what a mother can or cannot forget?” Ma shoots back.
We calm both of them down and have them inspect the sweets Chotomama brought. It is impressive that he has been able to find any at this hour, for we have been hearing about how news of the regime-fall has led to all sweetmeats shops being hollowed out within hours.
“Did you call Amma?” Chotomama asks my mother, as they each eat with a diabetic’s appetite for sugar the chomchoms.
Ma says, “Oh tomorrow! I have to call them all. We need to get the arm X-rayed as well.”
“It’ll turn out fine,” he says, “He seems alright and not in pain.”

Whatever pain he has, he does not complain about. Ma forces him to sleep on the floor of her room later at night, so she can oversee his situation.
“There is no situation, Ma,” I say, laughing, “It’s a glorified cut.”
“You didn’t hear what they were saying at the protests today?” Chotomama says, before he leaves, “They will carry out a national survey and make a list of all those who had been injured gravely. Maybe we can get him on that list...”
Reaz protests, “That’s for those who lost a hand or leg!”
“Well you *almost* lost your hand!” Ma says.
“—but I didn’t!”
I have them sleep early. It will be a busy day tomorrow. A new dawn for a new country. I will need to go out and buy the paper and keep it preserved as a part of history—a history that I am part of, that I helped fashion through my own brother. He has been a small drop of the ocean that raised a monumental wave and crashed out all the cronies having fun at the beach at our expense. The future is still uncertain but for now there is honor.
I wake up next morning to Ma’s voice, “Get up,” she shouts, more as a warning, “Your grandmother is here.”
Ma tells Nanima of Reaz’s brush with death. “My son, yes,” she says animatedly, “How could I stop him? I can’t be the mother that takes that away from him, even if it breaks me inside.” I can imagine Reaz being embarrassed at her actions, but I can sympathise. This is the rare luck that never shines on us, confusing her and making her excitable.
Nanima gets too emotional, “I know something was going to go wrong! That’s why I prayed last night. I prayed most of the night and Allah heard me, and see! He saved you, my boy. You are here in peace,” Nanima hugs Reaz and combs over his hair, “You imagine what would’ve happened if I hadn’t prayed? I keep telling you two to pray regularly.”
I book an appointment with the clinic for the evening. Ma wonders if Nanima will want to accompany us to the clinic, before I flatly turn the suggestion down. There are limits to this circus.
This is an excerpt. Read the full story on *The Daily Star* and Star Books and Literature’s websites.

Shahriar Shaams is a writer and translator. His works have previously appeared in Singapore Unbound, Adda, Feign, Small World City and in the anthology Bridges Not Borders. He can be reached on Instagram @shahriar.shaams.



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

POETRY The creation of heart

FARIA MOTIN
One morning,
God asked His angels to make a heart.
They did not know what a heart was.
They asked:
What does it hold?
What does it do?
God said,
“Take a symphony.
Look at the leaves—
how the air touches them,
how they move without being told.”
The angels wondered.
God spoke again,
“Look at the sun and the night,
how they take turns.
Put the goodbye of the sun
into the greeting of the moon.”
“Put how the waves touch the sand
and vanish,
only to be reborn
and reach for it again.
Put the clouds
brushing the tops of mountains.
Put the promise of love.”
The angels asked once more,
“What is love, God?”
God answered,
“The urge to feel death
without the heart stopping,
the urge to feel life
without having to die,
It is the touch of the unknown
the unseen,
the unspeakable.”

Faria Motin is an artist and cultural activist who expresses her thoughts through writing poems and songs, and adding tune to them.



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

POETRY Potatoes are burning in the fryer

KAZI MEHERU TASFIA
The third time I’m washing my hands with dish soap,
He is on the other side of the phone,
It’s Thursday, November, dry, and cold,
And my hands smell like garlic and onion,
And love looks like tomatoes and oregano
Sitting on the counter.
Yes, everything circles back to love.
To love through vegetables
My hands must get dirty, smelly, oily,
To dissolve the sound of an aeroplane
We must love loudly
Through ink and paper
Recite a love poem with anxiety in our stomach
We must write poetry inconveniently.
In order to love mystically
We must light the candles

Try not to burn the house, your hands, or your heart
Keep it safe, let it breathe, let the air in.
In order to love mindfully,
We must leave the city,
Must escape the piercing eyes of the new political party.
To love is to hold the knife
To love is to do the math
To love is to carry a box full of fruits
To love is to buy flowers,
Either way you carry the burden of it, of love.
Anyway, my potatoes are burning and he is almost here.

Kazi Meheru Tasfia is a poet who tries to rebel through her words. Find her work @poems.words.thoughts on Instagram.