



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

FLASH FICTION

The rickshaw artist

One day, he thinks, he will paint the girl with the red earphones into the scene, somewhere between the tiger and the cranes: just a small figure, running late, carrying the whole exhausted evening on her shoulders.

AJWADUL ISLAM KHAN

In Dhaka, the traffic doesn't run; it limps. At seven in the morning, the buses are full, coughing black air, CNGs wheezing past, rickshaws threading between them like colourful tops. From the expressway above, you'd think the city is having a stroke, but downtown it's just another evening.

Aminul pedals one of those needless. His rickshaw is older than his marriage, older than his daughter, and far more famous. The hood is painted with a single continuous scene: a river view at sunset, a tiger drinking beside a girl in a red sari, cranes in construction straight into the smog of Dhaka. Tourists photograph it when the light is right. Local boys call it "the moving cinema."

Tonight, a greyish blue sky is

hovering above. Aminul whistles as his bell is busted, a thin tuneless sound that repulses people away rather than attract them, perfect for parting the crowd. His shirt sticks to his back like glue. He is 42 and feels sixty until the wheels turn, then he feels 16 again.

At the corner of Elephant Road a woman flags him. She is maybe 25 years old—a university badge hangs from her neck, earphones in—an exhausted kind of beauty that belongs only to this city.

She climbs on without bargaining; that alone tells him she's late for something that matters. "Hatirjheel," she says, voice almost lost under the horns.

He nods and pushes off. The rickshaw groans like it's personally offended. They crawl through Kakrail, past the mosque spilling light and men onto the pavement, past biryani smoke

thick enough to chew. She takes out one earphone. Polite.

"Bhai, your rickshaw is incredible. Who painted it?"

"My daughter," he lies, because the truth is too long for one ride.

Actually he painted it himself, night after night under a single bulb, using brushes made from his wife's old hair and colors bought with money meant for the gas bill. He painted what he remembered from his village before the river ate half of it, before he came to Dhaka with two shirts and a promise.

The girl leans forward. "What's the tiger drinking?"

"Moonlight," he says.

She laughs, surprised, and the sound is so light it almost lifts them out of the jam. At Hatirjheel, the lake is a black mirror holding a thousand broken bulbs. She tells him to keep the change and as walks away; she touches the

Painted tiger's head, her hand shaking like it might bite any minute.

Aminul watches her disappear into the neon. Then he looks at his hands on the handlebars: cracked, stained with cobalt and crimson that will never quite wash out.

The traffic exhales. He rings the broken bell anyway—a dull clunk—and pedals back into the breathing city.

One day, he thinks, he will paint the girl with the red earphones into the scene, somewhere between the tiger and the cranes: just a small figure, running late, carrying the whole exhausted evening on her shoulders.

Dhaka will understand.

"The rickshaw artist" was awarded the first prize in the flash fiction segment of the creative writing competition at NSU DEML 2025 Winter Fest.

POETRY

Memories

IFTEHAZ YEASIR IFTEE

My memoirs of 2025, do you know I want to forget you?
Breezy January, when you took my grandma away from me
And I had to dig a grave five feet deep, didn't you know I would never want to meet you again?
Or dear April, when you stripped away my job, tore apart my savings
And make me surf aimlessly between my rooms, Didn't you think I have other months to survive?
Ah! How many dates I now cannot recall, have killed me bit by bit.
They have given me death in a life I cannot live.
Days of no ration and rusted kitchen supplies,
Fear and shame of guests arriving suddenly
And judging my unpreparedness and smelling my insolvency—
Have made July and August the most distasteful.
The days went by, but still the roof held firm.
The empty kitchen taught us how to stand,
And in the quiet of that barren year,
I found a pulse that hunger could not stop.
And now, as you pack your bags to leave and mix quietly in the dark,
Do you know that I want to forget you?
Do memories know, I want to forget them?

Iftehaz Yeasir Iftee, a student at IBA, University of Dhaka, is a featured poet in the global anthology *Luminance* under the pseudonym Brotibir Roy.



FLASH FICTION

Pirouette of a phoenix

RIFAH TASHFIA ISLAM

Emily's right leg trembled as she stood alone on the wooden stage, the darkness that surrounded her felt almost alive. The curtains emanated an ornate grandeur that seemed to swallow her diminishing confidence. A deep, velvet red breathed around her like the wings of a creature waiting to rise. Beyond the blinding lights, the audience blurred into a dark maze of minuscule, glowing faces. Some stared at her with eager curiosity, others with an impatience that she could practically feel with the crawling bead of sweat on the back of her neck.

The silence pressed against her chest, the buzzing in her head mingling with the thudding of her heart. She closed her eyes and the past rushed



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

A hoop shone above her like a silver halo, a strip of silk hung around it like a cascading waterfall in white, waiting for her to hold on. A soft gasp echoed around as she placed her right foot forward, the only foot she had now, yet the only foot she needed.

In. The flashes flickered through the remnants of that unfortunate night.

She remembered finishing her final routine that night, her lungs burning delightfully from the effort, her head swaying slightly through the graceful turn, and legs spinning in rhythm, when a sharp, electric jolt sliced through her left leg. A single moment.

A single fall. A single failed attempt at a pirouette. What followed were sirens, concerned questions, the metallic taste of a fear that was so foreign to Emily that she blocked everything out until—"We're so sorry... we couldn't save the limb." These few words would replay in her head endlessly.

What she did not understand was that the silence held a more merciless kind of pain—the quiet, pitying glances, the gentle touch of condolence

that felt more like pricks of a thousand thorns, the whispered assumptions that her life as a dancer had ended before it even began. Her body showed its fractures, but her spirit held the punctures no one could see.

Weeks passed, where she couldn't bring herself to listen to music. Months passed where she couldn't wake up without mourning the leg which used to spin her through the glossy floors of the studio. Until one day, an anger rose inside her, a fire that crackled beneath. This fire was quiet but fierce; the pitying stares stirred the embers that were sitting beneath the ash. She held onto a realisation that she did not mourn her lost limb as much as she was made to mourn what everyone assumed she lost with it.

Emily wanted the stage again, she wanted the movement, the flow, the adrenaline, and most importantly, herself.

She was told what she asked for was impossible, she was dismissed for balance would be unreliable and her safety was uncertain. However, the time to heed to warnings was long gone. It was time to listen to the memory of familiar beats: both of her heart and the music.

She found her way, through muscles that burned, blisters that reopened, moments that frustrated her to tears and relentless training that moved like sand through the hands of time.

Just like that, three years had passed and Emily relearned how to hold onto gravity. She found strength in parts of her she didn't know existed. It was like a language of her own. She spoke with every part of her body that translated her refusal to let her identity shrink around the absence of a limb.

And now, as she stood centrestage, the air thick with anticipation, a moment suspended on the edge that was risky, one she had bled and dreamed into existence. Emily opened her eyes.

A hoop shone above her like a silver halo, a strip of silk hung around it like a cascading waterfall in white, waiting for her to hold on. A soft gasp echoed around as she placed her right foot forward, the only foot she had now, yet the only foot she needed.

Gentle music hummed through the air as she lifted herself with a practiced grace, twirling like a bird taking her first, confident flight. When she released her hands in an impossible moment of suspension, everyone saw her in her true form:

No longer a girl missing her left leg—but a phoenix, mid-pirouette, who was reborn under flashing lights.

"Pirouette of a phoenix" was the first runner-up in the flash fiction segment of the creative writing competition at NSU DEML 2025 Winter Fest.

FLASH FICTION

Lumi and Neveah

ZANNATARA HOSSAIN

Inner monologue: "Life is a bit sometimes. You don't know what might happen the next moment. Currently having my lunch, keeping all my random thoughts aside. It's been raining since morning. These days, my mind keeps drifting from here to there like the weather. The weather is so uncertain, so is my mind."

Life feels so pathetic at this moment. Like, how unstable could it become for me? I wonder if I hadn't met people on the way, and only if I hadn't wasted so much time and effort on them! How amazing would it be for me? How can I blame the bad weather outside when I'm to blame for not taking the necessary equipment? I didn't shut my window.... sometimes wonder when it all started... Maybe the day when I had learnt how to tie my shoelaces or when I could cross big roads on my own without needing the big warm hands of my father."

Neveah wonders when it all began to feel less like a human connection and more like a train journey, meeting new people only to watch them

leave at the next station. Perhaps this belief has begun to take root in her since the day she started losing people, even after giving her all. She often finds herself reminiscing about the letters she once wrote, wishing that the people she has lost, at least, could read them.

In one of those unsent letters, she wrote:

Dear best friend,
It's been so long since I last talked to you. I know I could text you and check up on you at any moment. But how can I do that when you have been the one to put winters in our hearts? Do your eyes still twinkle whenever you think of me? Or do you still have dimples when you hold back a laugh? Does your cat 'furry' still wet your bed? Do you not miss me? I still stare at our shared memories with affection and warmth. Is your life better when I'm not in the picture anymore? Why is it like that you're more present in the memories you left than in the ones we made together?

"Lumi and Neveah" was the second runner-up in the poetry segment of the creative writing competition at NSU DEML 2025 Winter Fest.



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