



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

FICTION

Solitude

Who knows how many days will pass like this? Sometimes I take Muniza to the Hemayet Ali Library next to the Town Hall. Deepto sits there, pretending to read a heavy book. Having seated Muniza, I say, “I have a bit of work,” and stand waiting outside. When I return, I find them like statues.

AFSANA BEGUM

When Muniza stands on the moss-covered railing and leaps onto the roof of the adjacent house, the hem of her kamiz puffs up like a parachute. As the balloon of wind deflates, I see her standing on another moss covered carpet-roof of the neighboring house. Looking at me, she says, “What’s wrong? Why are you sticking your tongue out like Goddess Kali? Jump!”

In a voice that is almost trembling, I say, “I can’t, Mun!”

“What a coward you are! It’s so difficult to get around with you.”

In wounded pride, I feel like saying, then you don’t have to walk with me. But I compose myself; I do not want to lose her company. In fact, I wouldn’t even grow tired of wandering with Muniza day and night. Besides, I am engaged in a noble task at the request of my dearest friend, Deepto. I have to set Muniza up with Deepto. In the neighborhood slang of those days, it was called “making a line”; in simple terms, I had to fix them up. Stuck at a cigarette shop on a pouring rainy evening, smoking one cigarette after another, I had given Deepto my word that I would fix them up.

Looking at Muniza’s annoyed face standing on the green carpet-roof, I think once more: let’s give it a try! Taking a few steps forward, just as I lean over the railing at the edge of the roof, I see a narrow strip of flat ground visible between the two three-story buildings. Way down below. It rained a short while ago, and everything is muddy and slushy. When I grab the railing, my hand gets wet as it rests on

the clumps of moss. Is Muniza crazy? Looking at the narrow void between the two buildings makes my head spin. If my feet miss the other roof, I go straight down. After that, it will take at least 15 minutes just to drag my body out. As these ominous thoughts cross my mind, I suddenly remember—why should I jump? Am I the District Commissioner’s daughter like Muniza? Do I have a desperate need to escape without telling anyone? I can just take the stairs down and walk right past Muniza’s driver. This is my own house; I can leave and enter a thousand times. I don’t need to take such a massive risk with my life just to slip away to the banks of the Kanchan River while leaving a car parked in front to show that I entered this house and am still here! Looking at Muniza, I make a face at her and run toward the stairs. In this area of Maldahpatti, there are eight to 10 houses of the same height lined up one after another; thick walls plastered with moss.

Descending to the street, I whistle. Muniza’s driver and peon look up, drawn by the sound of the whistle. Their eyes narrow, perhaps wondering if they have ever seen me with Muniza on the college field. Ignoring them, I try to weave a complex tune into my whistle and look ahead, watching to see which house Muniza will emerge from. A little later, Muniza comes out through the side door of the fourth house. Looking back, I see the burly peon and the driver sitting with the car doors open. It is muggy and humid after the rain; I give Muniza’s damp hand a sudden, sharp tug so they won’t catch us if they abruptly

turn around. Then, we board a rickshaw and head toward the old railway bridge.

Deepto is sitting in pocket number 2 of the old rail bridge over the Kanchan River. This was prearranged. Yesterday, Deepto handed me half a packet of cigarettes and extracted a promise that I would bring Muniza there. That’s why I used my younger sister to bring Muniza to our house and went through all this trouble. We sit with our legs dangling into the bridge’s pocket. Beneath our three pairs of feet rushes the turbulent mountain current. Amidst the gurgling sound of the water, we exchange small talk. Muniza had been talking to me like a sparkler until now, but for some reason, the moment Deepto arrived, she became distracted. Her attention is focused on the white foam beneath our feet rather than on the conversation. I grew restless; after all, Muniza was brought here so she could get close to Deepto. I feel as though I almost blurt out, Hey Mun, say something! My half-packet of cigarettes won’t be halal otherwise. How did the Punarhaba River get named the Kanchan River? Is it because of the glittering golden sandbanks all around? Muniza doesn’t even participate in our curious conversation about the naming of the Kanchan River.

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them like statues. Why is there no conversation? When I gesture to them, Muniza gestures back, pointing to a notice: “Silence is requested here.” Sometimes I take Muniza to Jamal’s tea stall. She likes thick, milk-heavy tea with a layer of cream on top. So do I. Only Deepto sits between us, drinking red tea infused with ginger and cloves. Jamal pours the tea liquor from a height of three feet into the dense milk. The cup froths up. Seeing this, both Muniza’s and my mouth water. It makes no difference to Deepto. Deepto steals glances at Muniza, nothing more than that.

One day, Deepto says, “Whatever I want to say to her, I can’t say a single thing when she’s right in front of me. What do I do, tell me?”

Scratching my head, I say, “Write a letter.”

He says, “I’m even too shy to write a letter!”

“Oh come on, you’re hopeless. Forget it then...” I feel annoyed.

Deepto grabs me tightly, “Buddy, please do something. Save me.”

I say gravely, “Alright, I’ll write the letter myself. You’ll see, she’ll come running.”

Translated from Bangla by Alamgir Mohammad. The original story first appeared on Prothom Alo. This is an excerpt. Read the full story on The Daily Star and Star Books and Literature websites.

Alamgir Mohammad teaches literature and Translation Studies at the tertiary level. He has published 25 titles in translation.

POETRY

Scorching silence

NISHAT ANJUM

They say silence is peaceful.
They’ve never met mine.
Mine arrived at thirteen—
uninvited, unannounced.
The moment my grandfather was diagnosed with cancer.
Something in his throat.
Something that would eat away his voice.
Back then, I didn’t know much.
Just that cancer meant the end of people.
Now, at twenty-three, I know every kind,
every cruel stage, every sterile prognosis.
But none of them explain why I still flinch at silence and why it burns.
That day, nothing was said.
No weeping, no explaining.
Just a silence that slithered under doors,
settled in corners,
and pressed its heat against my skin.
My grandfather.
The man who once held my fears like feathers—
became still.
My best friend,
my quietest joy,
my softest refuge,
began to vanish not with screams or sorrow,
but with an unbearable absence of sound.



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

He couldn’t speak.
The cancer stole that first.
So I became the voice.
I’d sit beside him on the cold mosaic floor,
telling him about class tests,
the new girl who laughed too loudly,
the teacher who wore mustard socks.
Trying to fill the silence with stories,
so it wouldn’t eat me too.
But still, it lingered.
It pressed its weight on my chest,
sat like fire on my shoulders.
A silence so loud,
so scorching,
I could feel it blister my bones.
Then came the day
he asked to see my grandmother.
Asked to apologise-however one speaks
when the throat no longer does.
But she refused.
They hadn’t spoken in decades.
I never knew why.
All I knew was that even in his final days,
even in the heavy stillness of dying,
her silence spoke louder
than forgiveness ever could.
No one forced her.
No one urged.
The silence between them stood untouched,
a monument of decades.

This is a snippet from the poem. Read the full piece on The Daily Star and Star Books and Literature websites.

Nishat Anjum, while pursuing a degree in medicine, finds herself perpetually caught between medicine and memoirs, forever returning to questions of identity and the emotional cartography of ordinary life.

FICTION

Radiant deluge

MONIF SHAH CHOWDHURY

(0)

How far can love reach? From one lip to another? From one corner of a room to the other? Between two cities? Can love traverse the vast emptiness that lies between the constellations? If that is the case, then why...

(1)

“..because of this, the amount of radioactive waste has already exceeded the critical point, causing the second largest station in the orbit to be under threat. Even though the station was in Luna’s orbit majority of the crew’s nationality is—”

Tejayi was humming a song to herself. It was a holiday today, and there wasn’t much pressure from work. She had turned off the news that was playing softly on the home system and stood on the balcony with a cup of coffee in hand, gazing into the distant horizon framed by glass. Tejayi lived in a small two-story house in Bongotown, the largest crater in the South Settlement. The entire crater is covered with anti-radiation glass. Bongotown consists of about 200 houses and a few government hospitals. From the balcony, sometimes one can see the Earth in

the pitch-black ocean. Vast. Bluish.

And every time Tejayi gazed at this bluish beauty, she remembered her beloved Nilo. No, that’s not right; Nilo hasn’t been embraced as her own yet, only in her thoughts. And as soon as the thoughts of Nilo begin a blue shift in her heart, a red-shift of embarrassment starts to spread across her cheeks. Ugh!

Tejayi smiles. She loves Nilo. She doesn’t know what words to use to express the utmost love. Otherwise, she would have used that instead of “love”.

Today is the day to meet Nilo. Although they see each other a few times a month due to work, today’s meeting on a holiday feels different. No one will be in their uniforms today; instead of the factory’s bright white light, she will see Nilo in the dim orange light of the restaurant. Tejayi will discover what kind of drinks Nilo likes and what he will talk about while walking down the road, free from the busyness of work. Today, Tejayi will know everything! Uff!

Although, this isn’t really a date. Even on a holiday, they are essentially meeting to discuss the company’s project. Still, Tejayi knows very well that she will never get

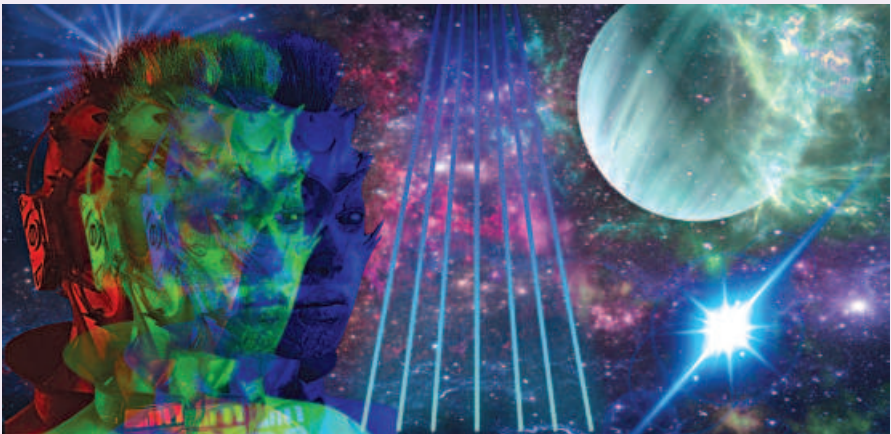


ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

such an opportunity again.

I need to be honest with my feelings.
I have to tell Nilo that I love him!
I must tell Nilo that I love him.
There was a secret I wanted to share,
Friend, will you have the time?
Just hear it once and forget it,
But don’t tell anyone again.
Many walk around saying “I don’t love,”
Yet in their hearts, love resides.

For so long, one was ordinary, among many,
But today, one feels so different,
In the blue of heart’s darkness...
Tejayi started humming again.

(2)

“I’m Nilo Warda. From the Hydroponics team.”

Tejayi was taken aback that day, but she quickly composed herself. “I’m Tejayi

Acharya, from the Lunar Soil Sampling, Researching, and Repurposing Department. I believe we’ll be working together?”

“That seems to be the case,” Nilo replied. “It’s a privilege to work directly with a scientist from the G-Lab. I hope the terraforming project progresses even faster.”

“Excuse me, G-Lab?” Tejayi raised an eyebrow in confusion.

“Haha, don’t take it the wrong way,” Nilo said, raising both hands in a gesture of surrender. “It’s just that saying the full name of your department takes a while, so we shorten it to G-Lab.”

Tejayi chuckled softly. That was the beginning. After that, during breaks at work, she gradually started to understand Nilo through their conversations.

This is an excerpt. Read the full story on The Daily Star and Star Books and Literature websites. The story was submitted to a contest that took place during the August flood 2024, where participants had to write a sci-fi based on an AI generated image.

Monif Shah Chowdhury occasionally writes for Star Literature.