

High Knocks

Written by Hasan Abir

Under the noise of constructions

Much more airy here, beside the open windows, than not. How lovely and skin-cooling this passing wind is! A sweet benefit of living high in the sky. Mind is a lot less stiff now. How I yearn for a break from this darkness—for an image! In my daydreams, I piece together a map of this view, but it fulfills me very little. Listen: Could you kindly paint in words the very bustling world that circles past these windows?

SHILPA DHAR:

Not for a moment am I left in peace. Why not? Fill up this lovely afternoon, like every other, with reminders of the black blotch that your existence leaves on us saints: me and your father. When I was pregnant, besides you, I was carrying high hopes for a bright future. Thank you for coming out blind; they've all long withered to death. What noble deed had my sister-in-law done back then to make her the mother of a perfectly healthy child? Your aunt is the most gaudy, greedy woman known to mankind, and yet she always gets her dreams met. I suppose that checks the ways of the universe: the bad always robs the good of fortune. Nevertheless, gone are those days of complaining; we all have to take what we get. And gone are my tears, too; they dry in the mountain air. Even if I really compare you to her son, down to the smallest details, how much of a difference is there apart from vision? Both of you exhibit, equally, all the symptoms of a spoiled brat! Name one thing we haven't provided you with. Food; shelter; traditional clothes; a decent education; a weekly tour around town—there's nothing left for us to cover anymore, yet you never cease to thank us, not even once. This spacious room that you now live in all by yourself, back in the day, would fit me and all of my four siblings comfortably. We would prefer it that way, too; there was a sense of unity. But despite everything, your pretty face can only display a dense and unchanging mood, implying that somehow we've ruined your life. Bear in mind that feeling gloomy in a room the size of yours and in a world the size of ours is as pathetic as you can get.

Only heaven knows what heinous devil rides your back at 3 AM to make you yell, "Hurry, mother, there's someone here, touching me everywhere!" This has been going on for a whole month now, and not for a single night in between did I get proper sleep. Girl, think sometimes of the trouble your mother goes through in life. But I take it: That's the least of your concerns. Instead, how about you think of the fact that a grown adult woman, like a feeble child, calls for her mother in the middle of her sleep? Yes, I'll gladly make that comparison, especially when there's no threat anywhere around

that I can find. On top of that, there aren't any signs of a thief or predator breaking into our house. Other than me, you, and your seldom-seen, only-for-the-meals father, every corner of this house is devoid of a soul at midnight. Not only do you wake up your father along with me, but every time you shout in woe, he runs to your room panicking before I can even open my eyes. Don't you know he has work to do in the morning?

Hear my yawns; the sun hasn't even set yet. Do something about that ghost of yours, unless you want me to collapse. These windows are letting in too much dust. Of course, they're expanding their restaurant on the hilltop again; business must be fruitful; imagine all the money they make. My nostrils are all sandy now. And so is all the furniture. More cleaning; that's great. Oh, I forgot. You were saying something about imagining the world in dreams, yes? Anything is possible in dreams, like they say. But a touch of realism would certainly help, wouldn't it? Next time you dream, add in the possibility of someone blind like you wearing worn-out slippers, going out under the sun, and begging at the feet of those rich tourists for just a small change. That is exactly who you would have been if you were born in any of those rickety houses in the neighborhood. It is a pity that we will only ever recognize what we once had instead of what we have now. Speaking of the tourists, what a terrible bunch of rascals to remind myself of! So malicious in nature. You wouldn't know this, but I've caught them several times secretly taking pictures of you. Sometimes, they do it from a good distance, and other times from up close, especially when I'm not around to shoo them away. We can only hope they aren't crooked enough to release your face into the wilds of perverts.

Yes, I understand that your mother's calls to reality can be too much to take in, but your tears cannot prove me wrong. Neither does crying a river do you any good; dry your face with this cloth. Fine, I'll bring you some relief. A mother cannot keep a steel heart for too long. Looking through the window, I see a beautiful flock of rarely-seen, green, orange-breasted pigeons flying dizzily in an orbit above the clean-air valley, although their flapping wings are

too faint for my ears to make out; perhaps, rather, my eyes are creating the illusion of sound. It must be those non-native, caged birds that a tourist lets loose for a show. How anxiously they dance in the sky—nervous to go back to their cages! And if I peek down below our treasure hill—oh, what a soothing scene to lay eyes on! The waterfall's endless descent creates these hypnotic ripples on the surface of our beloved, pristine lake that you irresponsibly defiled with your bloody mess just this morning. But no one could tell anymore, for nature, by itself, has brought the lake back to its usual purity.

Quite possibly, at night, the dreams that you sew together to make sense of the world are tricking you into blaming, unjustly, an imaginary figure by your bed, all out of the desire for touch. That would explain the odd delay in leakage this month. Fitting all the pieces together, I've come to understand that your wish to have a husband and kids is growing each day, touching the roof by now. Who knows you better than I do? I've lived through your age. It's all completely natural, but I don't have to foolishly look around out of this window to find the man. Your mother has already arranged a meeting for you in advance without your knowledge. Deny it all you want, but she is always a few steps ahead, dear. The other day, your uncle from the big city surprisingly remembered us after months and rang the telephone. He called to tell me how much he thought of you, as he regularly observed his new co-worker. Not only is this man fair and good-looking, but there's no chance for him to, under my brother's nose, lie to us about his wealth. What I told you so far is only at the base level; your uncle specifically added: "This man is exceptionally cultured, traditionally valued, and a mother's son by heart." Imagine my happiness hearing all these things! However, your uncle only made my dream come halfway true; now it's on us to handle the other half. So, right after I hung up the call with my brother, making use of the contact details he managed, I gave a ring to your future groom's parents for a proposal. Good news! They're willing to travel all the way to our house to check you out. Also, on the call, they mentioned that their

son really isn't interested in marrying any of those city girls. They're too wild and unfeminine, his parents explained. Well, I've raised you to defy those exact degenerates. Who else, other than you, could be the perfect fit for their son? This makes me so excited! Yes, of course, I've told them all about you, too. Being blind might seem like a dealbreaker to most, but in their case, they don't mind much. Such generous people! Their hearts are the size of the moon! Now, only your face and your obedience remain valuable to them, neither of which you lack. Occasionally, your morose nature might poke them, but if I could bear that for twenty years, they, too, should have no problem with it. For everyone's sake, put a lively look on your face the day they visit, which is going to be very soon—only a week later. Moreover, they will be taking a ten-hour train journey to get here. That would probably leave them exhausted with no patience to spare, so try not to disappoint them. Understood everything? Oh, how stupid of me to expect my news to bring a change to your mood! Still, a frown must persist and grow.

Anyway, I'm done oiling your hair. Such a joy to put fingers through it; so lush! What a pity; nowadays, my hair is more stuck to the comb than my head. Oh, someone's at the door—our maid, probably. I have to be with her now. But before I go, let me make a few things clear to you about her. I understand that she might be a bit too nosey and vocal, though it was still poor of you to ask me to shut her up yesterday. If we people of wealth don't listen to these laborers' cries, who else will? Her children at home are all demand-heavy, while their mother is the sole earner of the house. Can you imagine her toil? Apparently not; you just had to rub these remarks in: "They didn't choose to be born; she brought them into this world to be slaves!" What do you know about the world? You haven't even seen a tiny fraction of it, and neither will you ever. She was right to push me to think about your marriage. When a man fills up a woman, her only choice in life is to serve him, his children, his and her parents, his and her relatives, his and her guests, and so on. You may naively wish to fly like those pigeons, but there will always be a cage to return to.

BIPLOB DHAR:

(No response (no interest))

ISHRAT PARVEZ:

My head struggles to make sense of your overspilling politeness and the frailty beneath; however, nowadays, my heart grasps onto something, or perhaps only its signs. The first sign was a few days ago: your smiling, trembling lips, as I praised your beautiful, long, spread-out hair; and the second was a few weeks ago: your gentle, quiet teardrops falling on the window sill, as I had been sitting across the room and out of your notice. Your face morphed not out of sorrow but rather of great fury, as my heart understood. Oh, how unfit for your sweet face and its innocent, narrow eyes! I couldn't be more lucky to have your genes passed on to me.

I carry this memory as if it happened yesterday: One fine afternoon, when I was just a little girl playing with the kids on the street, a young adult man in his cargo shorts walked up to us and, jokingly, he said, tried putting his hands everywhere on us girls. We blended so well among the boys that nobody could catch him doing that. Even if someone did, it wouldn't make much difference, because when I yelled, telling him to stop, he and other older adults nearby surrounded me to give a lecture on manners. I had no one by my side that day, not even the other girls; they were too afraid to speak. Still, I thought that I had you two as support: my mother and father. Remember how you both responded? "Get back in the house right now!" he sternly ordered me, and you rhymed along. Later, for extra salt on my wound, he absorbed that short-pants man's complaints about me as if they were all true. I hold no grudge against you; I understand how little of a voice you have in this house. But after all that, I remember vividly lying on the bed with my back against the pillows, shedding tears of anger just like you did the other day. Since then, I've learned to lull myself better, and now that has become nothing other than a horrid, vulnerable incident that I try to forget. Aren't those moments stupidly painful? You feel all of the burdens at once, only to seem like a ham actor from the outside.

Enough of that for now; let us shift our focus, like you asked. How should I describe to you what I'm seeing? Well, I have a peculiar way with words; still, it should solve some of the puzzle for you. First, I must introduce this disappointment: I'm far from being an intellectual. They've never appealed to me, either. I find them too flirty, especially the men; their eyes are always on virgins, no different from imbeciles. Anyway, let me push the windows further open.

*A stage lay a play before in layers.
West: The harrowing burnball
Shines through a run of puffs, the crannies of pillars,
On the dusty bed of asphalt
And each side of an appalled paper-crowd.*

*Going past the open drain burrows:
Some hop across; others only have to bear the stink
From their cheap-colored, expensive automobiles.
They are all rolling off, either way, towards the east,
Like dappled marbles free from a child's fist.*

*North-east corner: dives in the center,
A batch of sparrows and crows,
Merrily flitting, or it would seem so,
For there's little light left in the day and long ways
To get back their way home: ill trees.*

*"Too far!" they conclude, just about to perch
On the roof of a soon-living half-building.
But before their wings come to a stop,
A man lunges to drop his headpan
Full of stone beads near the birds' knees.*

Forget them, for, overwhelmingly,

*The rotor blades above chop through the sky
From the west to eastward and over the cone-ending
Of our still murky sewer—a forgotten river,
Remembered still by those with a weak nose.*

*If only I could, I would wrap this stage
In a box with a lid on top and several locks
To leave it, like a relic, up in an attic somewhere.
But why must I put it there?
That's where it toppled from, with a din.*

What a routine to be a part of! So much open bigotry in the name of culture! Now, put your skin-peeled palms over my eyelids; I've seen enough. If not for you and this breeze, I would have shut the panes long ago. Oh, I'm in such anguish for this side of the world; it frightens me—it stops me from peeling open the woman living inside. But, why? Suppose you have your head tilted up to the sky—directly at the sun. Wouldn't you, at some point, face away? It's deadly, you know. In contrast, what I see more in people is a strong rejection of the sun's great force, taking it so far as to make the sun seem rather like the moon. Somehow, I still buy into such nonsense now and then, believing it to be the absolute truth, especially when I find myself fragile. But that believer couldn't be me; she's rather someone others make me out to be. And who is that, exactly?

She is a young woman of privilege from an upper-class family; an undergraduate law student at a very expensive university; an alcoholic godless degenerate; and a narrow-eyed slut. In fact, her father is so well off compared to the average that he can actually afford to keep his daughter in his house, unmarried, forever. Well, what does she know about money? Nothing. Easy come, easy go, easy come again. Then, there are those who wear her like an ornament because her face resembles their favorite pop stars. Very well, what about her lovers?

She has a few too many, to the point where she now jumbles their names. Those one-time-only men might be complete jokes, but they pose the least threat to her. Besides that, they fill up some of her empty cups in life, even if only by inches. The real hurdles to worry about are those she has to leap high over: men who try to control her thoughts and dreams. Take that one professor, for example. Oh, all his promises: "Be with me, darling; I'll grant you lifelong satisfaction; you won't need another; my wife is only a fight away from leaving." Another one to mention would be her long-term boyfriend, who, arrogantly, refuses to speak to her anymore. How melodramatic! But at least she found someone to replace him, albeit a boy—nevertheless, a good boy who thinks highly of her.

All these things amount to only one singular definition: femme fatale. That is all she is and will ever be. It's even worse when I, too, see myself in that light. How small my spirit has become under my own neglect! So much so that now I need to be on my knees, treading the ground with my hands, to find what I really am: an ant.

When I was a child, I had aspirations up to my neck to create things larger than myself—I dreamt they would be these huge landscapes of my imagination where I could run about free with my hands in the air. Yet I thought, "Now isn't the time; when I grow up, I will." Still, to this day, I sing the same song, while the passage of time has begun showing itself as dark circles under my eyes. Maybe I should rather blame those who actively discourage me from having a passion. Tell me, what else should we do other than what people expect of us?

Femme fatale: a role like any other, designed for us women. I understand that, coming from your barely-stirring upbringing, you might see it as anything but a role to play. Trust me, it's all the same. The moment you do anything to break free from that role, they're immediately ready to pull you down, mock you, or stay in complete disbelief. Men will do anything to put us in a box; that's how they make sense of us. But how fair is it to point fingers at

them when I barely listen to myself? Why did I ever agree to study law?

Anything else would hurt my future, I thought. If only I understood back then what a huge debt I was trapping myself into, I would be stress-free today. Regardless of what I did or didn't, my father would only accept repayment through my marriage, an imprisonment that is the cornerstone of a woman's life in this country. The idea is always simple: live with a man, but really, you live because of and for them. Mother, why do you endure so much in life—in marriage? Every blind woman deserves someone who can make them believe that they're missing nothing. Instead, he turned you into a half-mute, belittling your every step! Don't mind me saying this, but unknowingly, the only thing you've ever taught me in life is to avoid being you.

Ideally, I would like my life unfrozen, but not so fluid that it loses all of its shape or that someone or something would need to contain it. Slime—yes, like a lone slime too vile to touch or own, I want to flow with the river of time, constantly molded by the things in the way. For now, that will just be a fantasy; dolefully pursuing my passion would yield little to no money. Think of those independent filmmakers I often gush about: Most of the time, they can't even finish their films without a loan, and they barely make enough to pay the bank back! Filmmaking isn't exactly what I have in mind for myself, but art as a business is tough, no matter the form. Either way, my happiness is in doing, not in having.

Crying again? Please learn to control yourself, even just a bit. My words might be hard to swallow, but they're nothing for you to choke on. You have the impression that your daughter carries some deep, incurable pain inside, with the concept of love evaporating from her heart; it is all a stretch. My love for you goes further than I can express with words. And so it does for that boy I'm dating, the man I used to date, and, funnily enough, even the professor. Touch my lips and sense the smile on top. I'm a noble lover, despite the thousand complaints everyone has against me. I give away love

more than I take, unlike those romantic poets who beg for it on paper with their legs crossed and draped on their stools. Too cruel? They say, "What would a woman with a hundred men at her feet know about lovelessness?" What would a defenseless woman with a hundred men at her feet, pressing her to give up clothes and freedom, know about lovelessness? Perhaps a thing or two. What do I know? Again, unlike them, I can't express myself intricately with a basket of metaphors, so I'll have to believe I know nothing. But I do know these two magical words: love and making; another one: beautiful; and another to oppose it: filthy.

It's best to forget these words, except I cannot, knowing that I stem from the latter: filthy love-making. Right, I should whisper these things. What an unspeakably horrifying world this is! Danger everywhere, even at home! Your own father: How could he have a thought so foul, let alone shamefully bring it to life? I wish that you had hidden from me the many ways I relate to him. Oh, it is making me dizzy—the imagery of how he must have taken advantage of you at night! Worry not, mother; I haven't told anyone about this, and neither will I ever. The courage it would take to announce such a thing to friends and family is beyond me, though I've met some really gullible yet twisted young girls who muse on that sort of carnal relationship with their family. It's sickening! I blame pop culture for their polluted minds.

Fathers: the more, the wearier. Mine fall from the same wicked tree, with shapes only slightly different from each other. I wouldn't mind your husband if he, himself, were any less than a beast. He belongs to the kind that knows only unkindness. Whenever you think to ask him for some advice, he is always sure to dull you further by responding with something atrocious. His usual phrase: "You'll accomplish a jot in your life." With this remark, isn't he, in a subtle but obvious way, suggesting we commit suicide? This is the accomplished man he claims to be! Yet, when I compare him to my grandfather, whom I would rather not remember, he seems saint-like. Oh, father, my grandfather! Now that I've brought him into my mind, I should clarify: There wasn't a part of me who felt

the affection to go see him for the last time on the day he passed away. Attending his funeral was just too much to ask from me, and I don't understand how you can still act like I owe you an apology for that. On the contrary, I felt a certain, inexplicable relief for the first time in my life over someone's death. Even if I took out of my mind what he did to you—if it's even possible—I still couldn't tolerate a conservative government lapdog like him. How nostalgic he was for everything! Looking back is for those who enjoy rolling and smearing themselves in ashes—the ruins of yesterday. As long as I live, I'll live in a tent, putting it on the ground as the night falls, in the wilderness of today, and taking it with me again to wherever tomorrow is. If someone really, intensely hates today, they have a good reason to be glad: life is short the way it is. That old man no longer has to bear the modern world; the world no longer has to bear him. Now, if unmentioning his existence could mean his second death, I'll happily commit to it. There, I just zipped my lips.

It looks like evening came early today. Either that or my freewheeling thoughts have brought it closer. Oh, how beautiful this sky is in its majestic colors! I lied to you a moment ago; you've also taught me how granted we take our senses. I take back any hurt that I may have inflicted on you; you're the dearest to my heart, I'll have you know. Now, since you refuse to go out with me in favor of waiting for your husband, I'll have to leave without you. Let me see how you did my hair—oh, my, what a striking hairdo! I look like the muse of an intellectual bathing in affairs: my date. I mean, that's an assumption, but he could very well be cheating on me. Why wouldn't he? I'm much older than him—past the ripe age that most men prefer. It would be hard to let him leave if I wasn't already conscious of how our dates usually go. First, he will start off acting awkward, only to open up minutes later, talking endlessly about his high-art stuff that he thinks I have no understanding of. But I suppose, as long as I keep my mouth shut and suck him off at the end, he'll take me for an angel.

NAZRUL PARVEZ:

Oh, dreams, painting! Spend a day in my shoes, and you'll have the weather realized in no time. Who do you take me for? A sentimentalist? Neither have I the time, the energy, nor the will to serve you or your illusions. Well, yes, back before our marriage, I would have willingly discussed all those intellectually stimulating matters, such as the fragile nature of human bonds or all the different ways we alienate ourselves. What use are those words, said or written, without a mission in mind? In my twenties, when I still had my head free of bald spots, this quick-witted, although arrogant, long-equine-haired, deity-looking, fair-skin girl spun me around, playing me like a fool that I was, from every direction. Men could only fall madly in love with her; there was no other weaker way. All those many poems and letters that I wrote to her—how did she reciprocate? She threw them all in the bin! A night with her on the bed would have been a really big triumph for me—it would have made me feel like a bigger man today. After all, pretty girls are anything but straightforward. How could she always keep me an inch away while never letting me even hold her hand? I suppose it came down to a simple thing: my body type. I could dedicate my whole life to matching her smart, level-headed thinking, but it wouldn't make a difference; a thin and flat man like me just wouldn't cut for her. Now, answer this: Who else does one write for anyway? Poems, songs, and other artistic stunts are what people pull in the hope of winning their old love back into their lives. In the end, they are all acts of desperation in denial of the naked truth: the world is hollow and heartless.

My back—oh, so rigid. What a pain it is to be on the desk for an entire day! Now, turn away from the window; stop pretending as if you could enjoy the view. Come over here like a good wife and let your fingers work out their magic, starting from the shoulders. Also, hand me over the TV remote. Go down a little below—ah, yes, that's the spot; carry on. Lately, I'm having trouble understanding these new young employees in the office. To begin with, they talk like first-world country dwellers every time I need them to explain

something to me, while in the back of my mind, I'm thinking, "Son, I know the stench of the slum you grew up next to." How bizarre these men are! I could handle a couple of them, but the whole office heading in their direction is just too much for me. On one lunch break, I eavesdropped on a chat among themselves, and you wouldn't believe what I heard—none of them have televisions in their houses! Not only that, they were also saying they would rather stay informed through the internet—you know, the ocean of all bogus news? I fear the generations to come—what a dysfunctional world they're giving birth to!

Check out this strip of news at the bottom of the screen. As we predict, the promise of a bleak, collapsing future is still there. It was there yesterday, and it'll be there tomorrow, as per schedule. Hand me my glasses; the letters are too small to read. It's funny how putting on these glasses, along with my vision, cleared the fog from my mind. Now I remember seeing Ishrat on the way back home, at the entrance to some expensive restaurant. What fun it must be for her to waste my money on food and clothes! This time, however, she was roaming about with this peculiar boy, whom I had never seen before. Every week, there's someone new by her side; she has the patience of a child. Who am I telling all this to anyway? You seem to always know where she is and what she is doing better than everyone else. It was a clever move to hem you into her absurd little world, deluding you into thinking there's nothing wrong with it. Who knows what I did to make her spurn me like a speck? All her underprivileged friends must be well aware of how incredibly lucky she is to be my daughter. Eventually, she'll understand everything—the value of wealth and faithful connections—just not while we are still alive. Oh, what a waste of life! You know what? If she still speaks to you, no matter how rarely, push her with some of my advice, but don't let her guess it came from me. We can assume her nature by now: if she figures out where those words are coming from, she'll fume unreasonably. Tell her this: find a real hard-working, struggling, macho man to marry—not someone who has it all; rather, someone who's at the beginning stage, trying to

reach the top. That would teach her more life lessons than spending time with some loner with a gender crisis. She should understand how big of a curve people have to cross to go from nobodies to somebodies. Moreover, if she takes my advice, she'll come to terms with why most people fail to get there, which is because of themselves. Yes, I do realize how much stress a lifestyle of that kind would have on her, but it's all necessary to experience. After all, what has she really got to worry about?

If you had ever seen her refined face, you would only see a renowned movie star or a fashion model on it—on par with the conventional beauty standard. Even her silky black hair, when untied, flows in the air like it does in a shampoo commercial. Her figure, too, isn't any less electrifying. You might think otherwise, but narrow-eyed women, these days especially, garner quite a bit of attention in all of the media outlets. No wonder she has the whole city at her feet; what a joy it must be to play the merciless queen! The point I'm trying to make is that her physical attractions alone are enough to bring her a lifetime full of opportunities. Sure, I understand that she's quite a cerebral girl; she wouldn't want to abuse her looks. Well, I've provided her with all the means to keep her brain sharp, haven't I? Take my words: as soon as she's done with this semester, her law degree will throw countless high-paying job opportunities in her lap.

Despite all this, whenever she walks past me, I notice a certain dullness on her face, suggesting depression. You see, this is the problem with the youth today: they think they know everything, and soon after, they melt under the severity of their so-called profound knowledge. Kids never listen; they just do what they think is best. Then, all of a sudden, life becomes miserable for them. She has never felt the touch of a pair of strong arms, has she? If not, a heavy man would surely turn her into a woman, freeing her from the girl that she is. Anyway, talking about her is a waste of time. Instead, forget everything and just let her know that her father would like to have a word, secluded in a room.

And what is the matter with you? Why do you care about what lies beyond the windows? You're here, inside the house, with all the luxuries anyone could ever ask for. Do you need to have your eyes working to realize that? Common sense says not. Good grief! What an irrational family I have! Remove your hands from my back; it could do without your petty little taps. Oh, your curiosities! If you are really dying to know more about the world, press these buttons on the remote and quietly listen. Any news channel will do the job; I'm not just talking about ours. But listen—you will hear about everything from the ground to the sky and above. Don't mind the ads; they're only to make us money.

Shouldn't women pay attention to world affairs, too? Or is it best that they stick to tracking only their neighbors' whereabouts? Housewives don't always have to be so limited, you know. Once, I saw Ishrat read to you one of her tedious novels. What drives your interest so much in stories that have no significance to the real world? Here's something for you to defer to: Life bears no resemblance to dreams; it has consequences. Ah—heard that? The poor reporter just stumbled on his lines. He must have graduated recently. Imagine a society without journalism. We would all be clueless and eventually submit ourselves to believing rumors. I can see myself walking all the way to a store to buy something out of dire need, only to find out I should have brought double the money! The prices would fluctuate without anyone knowing it. Does that sound convenient to you? Journalism is one of the highest forms of power—the right hand of a country—the hand that writes and fights against corruption! The other day, one of our reporters came back to the office after being on the road for a week; his eyes looked extremely drowsy. All that time he was out there, he was so occupied with work that he couldn't find the chance to even call his wife! These pitiful reporters trudge through the roughest, impoverished corners of the country, under extreme weather conditions, to bring us the definite truth—the truth that contains poverty in it, with each of its sides: the living, unnourished poor and the dying, untreated poor. You know, those who, like hunters,

wander helplessly amid the city without much to hunt. Listen to this headline: “The price of rice reaches the roof, despite surplus production.” That might not affect us much, but something like this is a kick to the belly for those people out on the streets. On the other side of the spectrum, you have Ishrat and her clumsy friends who think they live among even distributions of wealth; they wouldn’t have these idiotic thoughts if their feet ever touched the ground.

These days, however, more families than before seem to be living a proper lifestyle with basic needs met. Still, no one can erase our roots, and most definitely no one should forget them. Remember the little foundation this country stood on during the war? What a devastating economic climate we had to overcome! During those years, I may have been just a boy, but those war-torn memories still haunt me to this day—they're still so vivid. I wish there was a way to get rid of them. Overall, I'm proud of my people for pulling through. What have we left to build? Better bridges, highways, and now even elevated subways—we have them all. Could we have dreamed of the political stability that we have today, back then? Or the lowering of crime rates? The sheer progress we made in just half a century brings a tear to my eye.

With that said, I'm mostly proud of my company, my channel, and the incredible amount of work that my team puts into it. You might wonder what’s the matter with me today; fine, I'll tell you about it. Who’ll understand my feelings better than my cook—my wife? Go bring my pants down from the hangers. Oh, you surprise me with how well you navigate the house—and that too without eyes! Anyway, as I was saying, I received this letter today. Why don't you read it? My bad; your kind husband will bear the reading for you. One of our viewers mailed us this letter with the subject: “The veiled but malicious nature of your channel.” Who would have thought that this day would come? Finally, we receive criticism of our very objective content. How pathetic! Here's what this so-called critic has to say:

Sir Nazrul,

I hope you're doing well. You must be, at least as long as the old people at home are alive enough to tune in.

The disrespect!

Well, I'm one of their sons, now reaching out to you. I'll be speaking on behalf of my old father, who is on the verge of passing away.

Too bad. Why should I care?

He is bed-stuck most of the time, refusing to do anything other than watch the news. Any time there's a positive change in his body, he immediately reverts it back to where it was by aimlessly channel surfing. Almost as hypnotized, he stares up at the clock with his thoughts and his eyes half the time away from the TV. Perhaps in his head, he is evaluating his entire life up to this moment, numbering his remaining days. Whether or not that is true, his health seems to show that doing anything else other than watching the news usually improves it, such as playing chess or going out with me.

This just keeps going, doesn't it? I wonder if he'll ever get to the point.

The reason I'm writing this letter specifically to you is that my father, after a while of going back and forth between channels, always ends up tuning to yours. He considers it the "cleanest" out of them all, whatever he means by that.

His old man is sharp, yet unfortunate to have such a blunt son.

Rather, what I see upfront is a jumbled-up, catastrophic set of events leading one after another, as if there is nothing else going on in this world. What can your average viewer do about any of these things that you show—accidents, rapes, murders of innocent women and children, or political leaders yelling? They have their own problems to

think about. Your goal isn't to convert your audience into activists, either. If that were the case, you would have to say goodbye to all the juicy content that your channel now runs on 24/7. What you really want them to do is sit in fear and stay glued to their TVs—fear of the heat, fear of the cold, and even fear of the rain. Every time there's a fire somewhere, your reporters jump down to the street like they've hit gold: "In the fire, we've found 26 injured and 3 deceased." Everything revolves around big numbers. Bodies are numbers, and numbers are bodies. I'm sure you've had deaths in your family. But did you at those times feel the great weight death holds for just a single person?

People live, and then they die. What's new about that?

Not only that, you have to be seriously insensitive and shameless to follow up on those tragic incidents with skin-whitener commercials. I firmly believe that very few of us would actually care about our complexions if not for these ads. They without a doubt imply that a darker skin tone is somewhat of a major flaw. To put it bluntly, it's a sick marketing scheme to bank money on people's insecurities, women in particular. I suppose this is nothing to be surprised about. After all, everything that you do is to the point and intentional. You have only one motive: to control our thoughts about ourselves and the world in the name of profit. Meanwhile, you leisurely sit on your throne, made of high morals and ethics, in the position to decide people's worth based on their choices in life. Threatening statistics might scare the average citizen, but the rest of us are tired of them. With all that said, I don't actually expect to spark a change in how TV channels like yours operate.

All these complaints for nothing? We have a very bright man here.

But I do expect my words to work like a grain of salt sprinkled over an earthworm; here, the worm is your superficial soul.

What a rebel! Only an underachiever in life has the time to sit down and write something so meaningless.

Ah, all this reading has got my stomach calling! Head to the kitchen. Brew me a cup of green tea—my muscles are all sore. And here—take this letter with you. Burn it on the stove.

Hey! If you can still hear me from back there, India won once again! What a shame, isn't it? Also, make a snack for me to chew on along with the tea.

Oh, but you made this yesterday too, didn't you? Well, it doesn't matter as long as it calms my stomach.

What a hollow meal—it made me even more hungry. Either way, it's almost time for dinner. If you're going to be quiet the whole time, I suppose I'll keep talking. There isn't much to your daily routine, is there? Let's make a mental list of your tasks: Do half of the chores that the maid leaves undone; cook meals three times; raise our daughter, although you've only ever lowered her. Indeed, a woman's life is nowhere else but a bed of roses, which, of course, comes at the expense of men! If, at the very least, you had given me a daughter who wouldn't smear dirt over my reputation at every step, I wouldn't be in half the anguish I am now. That reminds me of this question that I always had in mind; for some reason, I resisted asking it. How come I never see any of my wonderful traits—neither my looks nor my personality—in Ishrat? What's the matter with that? Have you been hiding her real father from me this whole time? Oh, so elusive! Bring it out of you; tell me, who is it? Ah, I see. I'll have to connect the dots myself. Let's trace back time—to a time when you were far from the old hag that you are today. Over a mountain, under a tree, inside a leafy cloak—the picture is almost setting in. Was it a tribal, good-time boy from the village who made love to you? Oh, woman, you gave me something to laugh at! You must have had too much fun! It turns out that blind people aren't saints either, are they? Calm your nerves; this isn't good enough of a reason to kick you out. After all, if I evict you, I will have to

tolerate the maid's cooking. Believe me when I say that I have tried a lot of other women's cooking; luckily for you, my stomach can only digest yours. Then again, I'm past the point of caring about these things. We're both grown adults, guilty of the same mishaps. Luckily, I never had to bear the consequences—the only time life has any mercy on a man. Who knows how many kids I have had throughout my life? All I know is that none of their low-grade, slut-like mothers were marriage material. But truth be told, I've never really seen myself as much of a family man. What have you and Ishrat ever meant to me other than meeting the expectations of society that came with my age? You know the people I'm talking about: coworkers, friends, families, neighbors, and so on. Oh, stop trembling. I didn't say anything so left-field as to hurt your feelings. Do you really believe I'm the only man who thinks that?

KHATUN PARVEZ:

Only a minute ago, this confused sky had a smile; now it's frowning. It is nearing the storm, a clear sign of God's wrath. Before the splashing raindrops drench the bed, let me close the window panes. Oh, my bones have become too weak for these rusty locks. Not for long will they, my limbs, still work. Nothing could I do about that. He will take me away on the day He has chosen for me. Our lives: we surrender to Him. Dear, you're too naive. There's nothing pure that stands past these windows—only man-made things. They all fall flat when compared to God's magnificent creations. Nature and us, the animals. But you don't buy any of that, do you? How come I don't see you anymore on your knees praying? I remember the loyal devotee of God you were. I remember: As soon as the prayer calls began, I would always find you at your holy place, standing with your drippy hands crossed. What now? Have you run out of sins to beg forgiveness for, with enough mercy to live by? Believing that is a sin on its own—the sin of ignorance. To even make up for your daughter's immoral actions alone, you would need to pray day and night for ten whole lifetimes. Rather, in a strange fate, she has turned you toward the devil. Perhaps not in this life will you understand the meaning and importance of my words, but, surely, your afterlife will teach you those. Our lives are only a test, handed down to us by the Almighty. An eternal hell awaits those who fail. Even still, it's never too late to make amends. This vast sky above us is only a slither of what makes His merciful heart. Start repenting, and maybe God will grant you your vision.

You are a calm and collected woman, as I have always known. What happened last night? Please keep my rotting health in mind; if you don't, your fights with my son will kill me sooner. I feel much weaker at night, too. Ishrat was the cause of the fight, or so I overheard. You must understand my son's feelings towards his one and only daughter. She has left him with not a single reason to stop worrying. Without coming off as too cold-hearted, let me remind you of this: She is thirty years old now, and her habits haven't changed any more significantly than those of her younger self. Not once have

I seen her come home by ten o'clock during this past week, staying with your family. Only God knows about her secretive and, most likely, filthy activities. Well, regardless, a few ideas—too shameful to mention—do come to mind. Despite my degrading memory, I still remember the smell of cigarette ashes in her room when, the other day, I went in to ask for help with my phone. Yes, I pity you and your blindness, but I must say that allowing her to embrace masculine habits like this must mean that none of your other senses work either. Back in the golden days, us housewives would get out of our way to make sure our husbands didn't waste their lives drinking or smoking. Now look at what the world has become.

Speaking of marriage, when does she plan to talk about it, if ever? How cunningly she avoids the topic—so many excellent proposals slipped from our hands! Mark my words: There will come a time when she'll struggle to be pregnant, and a deep sense of regret will cover her mind. Even if luck favors her with kids, you definitely wouldn't want to be their nanny. A mother should always be responsible for her own children.

I can't put my finger on what would make Ishrat reject her culture and womanhood the way she does. Never, at her age, was my son like that. Even if he had been that way, it would suit him better as a man. It makes the most sense to draw a parallel between you and her, but at the same time, it's nonsensical; you're so terribly introverted in comparison. Now that I've come to realize it, the westerners—I tell you—have to be entirely responsible for Ishrat's mobility. They plan to gradually convert our superior people into low-disciplined, pork-eating sinners like themselves. Dear, it's not all that bad to be blind; in this instance, you don't have to witness them expose their skin so exotically! Their intellectual property, too—literature, movies, and music—are all extremely destructive. There couldn't be a finer exemplar than your daughter; she proves to us how badly the West poisons our people. It's like they strip all the natural oils from our heads. Why can't she learn something from Dhrubo? I love all of my grandchildren, but Dhrubo—he is one of a kind. Oh, he and his lovely wife in Australia—that beautiful

couple—are expecting a baby soon! Now, tell me, what does Ishrat do exactly—sculpt objects from household junk? Laughable. If her art pieces are for us to marvel over, then why do they so absurdly lack meaning? I recall seeing one of them sitting on top of her desk. To make it, I assume, she tore the string of an Ektara to wrap, coiling it tightly, around a beautiful doll that her aunt gifted her when she was little. Its red dress looked violently taken apart, too. Along with that, she gouged away the doll's eyes, gluing them down on its nipples. What a horrific piece! Her doll has nothing to say about the world—nature, politics, society, or religion—apart from the vicious girl that its maker is! Is this really who you defend in quarrels with your husband?

Now, with all that I have, only Dhrubo brings me some joy in my old age. He lives oceans away, yet he thought about buying me this new phone. There must be something in return that he wants from me, or so you would think. But no, he has a gem for a heart; the only reason he gave me this is so that his grandmother, through technology, can easily communicate with everyone. Nowhere will you find such a sweetheart, especially nowadays. Other kids around his age or younger have long forgotten about their grandparents. Oh, I so terribly wish I hadn't given away so much of my money to Ishrat, even though I did it in good faith. Imagine all the obscene things she wasted my kindness on. Just the thought alone brings pain to my gut. What would she lose if she handed me some of her earnings as a tutor? The day before yesterday, very politely, I asked for the money, but of course, in return, I only got disrespect and a non-response. Money means so little when you keep it all to yourself. It must be in the back of her mind that her bank balance is somehow a secret to everyone. Who's going to tell her?

Speaking of the devil, does she always have to angrily slam doors behind her? In a blink, she flew back to her room. How overly optimistic I was to expect her to stop and greet this old lady! Perhaps her father's side of the family stings her too much, but what has she got against yours? Neither did she attend your father's nor your mother's funeral. I suppose we could take Ishrat

as not a part of this world; however, you really shocked us when you refused to visit your mother upon her death. On that day, Nazrul had arranged just about everything to take you to the hills. Why did you so crudely reject seeing her face for the very last time, especially when you did attend your father's funeral? I really can't make anything out of your strange intentions. All I know is that woman—your mother—was strong as steel. Her compromises—her dedication to family—are inspiring to all. No man can imagine the pain of bearing a child, let alone a blind one, for almost a year only to raise it for another twenty. Dear, on this occasion, we must unite our hands and pray. No, that's the wrong side! Face west and lift your palms. Let me help you.

Dear God,

*Grant us strength—
Grant us love—
Grant us money—
Grant us time—
To bear—
To adore—
To lust—
To work out
This chasm
That you dropped us in,
Called life.*

*But God, speak to me—
Grant me
More of this life.
More.
I've been your faithful servant.
Yes, that's who I am;
It's my life.
A wife*

*Left alone at home with
Pot stirrers and knives.
A mother
And a grandmother.
Trust me,
Unlike these mopes,
I'll mop the floors of heaven,
Dust off the furniture,
Make the beds,
Spray any reek,
And cook for all.
You're right;
I'm small and weak;
Naturally, I'm a woman.
But God, I've proven myself;
Don't take my breath yet.
Listen to me
Through this wet sky.*

Over the fizzling flow of blood

How still, how quiet, how otherworldly! It's so unconvincing to wake up to this erect consciousness when my whole life is one big sleep. Lack of transitions. A touch of a finger would help. My learnings: black: colorless; blackest: soundless. Hence, this room has to be pitch-dark. My fellow co-patients, have you all yet lost your way in this shared darkness, much like me? The way that you all adults sleep—so noiseless and so like mummies—terrifies me! It could be that none of you are really here. If so, then hello, my dear co-ghosts; in a trance, I feel myself the same. Oh, bless you and your wonderful pig snore, whoever you are and whichever heart disease brings you here! I was sure that I had lost my hearing. After all, I've already begun to feel my skin sagging; my hearing strength, too, should start ebbing away anytime soon. Perhaps gradually weakening ears make people of my age the loneliest. No longer hearing those muffled shrieks of the birds, the faint chiming bells of the poor, or the muted yelling honks of the rich in the distance does bring a sense of isolation. Inescapable, almost. To top all the misery, this conditioned air isn't any easier to breathe. Laying on my bed, I feel like a dead fish in a refrigerator, with tubes, needles, and machines to hold me in place. Beep. Living. Beep. Less. Beep. Sleeping. Beep. Less. These pulses must mean I'm doing half-well. Yes, I do, when my heart, here with this monitor and unlike being under the rigid hands of the clocks, beats in a steady rhythm without rushing—slowly. But when does dawn come? When does night end? Soon, I know, the morning will come, and along will come the doctor with his many tools and his many obedient nurses—help-him-cut-my-chest-open-alive nurses. They'll investigate, but what will they find inside of this patient? Patience? Resentment? Indifference? No, perhaps something more tangible. A stone. A couple. A million. Or none. Or nothing, yes, that. If, by miracle, they pull out the cotton from their ears, I'll make sure to scream in only vowels, for words would mean nothing, as complaints have always narrated my life, thoughts, and feelings. My

belief—awfully finite—has always been on a leash, dragged by whoever to wherever. After all, what is my name? Oh, bitter life, your bites! Now, Doctor, realize, instead, who you are: a religious nonbeliever with no faith in yourself. Your reports can mean nothing to me. I trust who I see through this mirror on the inner walls of my mind, hung by my dear daughter: a God that can do anything. A, E, and I owe you or anyone else not even a slice of my only life.

Mar, 2024—July, 2024