

Chewers by Masticadores

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"Sea-Crossings" by Shaheen Akhtar

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1.

"Is this thousand-year-old book going too?!" said the man resignedly as he passed by the open suitcase. A reply was unwarranted. Besides, the woman was worried about the weight of her luggage now. She repacked the suitcase several times. Items meant for the handbag should not go in the luggage. Neither should safety pins, nail clipper, needles, or perfume find their way into the handbag. She had to keep a strict eye on these mundane things, too. She had no time to respond to her husband.

The suitcase was locked, and the book, wrapped in a towel, slipped into a corner of the suitcase, although it was supposed to be in the handbag, a travel companion during transits. When the woman left her home in this state of confusion, the neighborhood was silent. The guard dogs on the street barked their goodbyes. As the car door closed, the lights in her house shut off one by one as if bidding a final farewell.

Lowering the window of the car, she thrust her face out. The sweet dawn breeze welcomed her, somewhat pollution-free and cool. The city, empty of people and traffic, looked magical in the lights that stayed awake all night. After a while, the car passed by a notorious garbage dump, and a stink filled the air. As she wound up the glass, the fear

returned, and she quelled it with the thought of this uncertain journey she was undertaking alone. What if it were her final journey?

Everyone had grown roots during the Corona pandemic. Moving anywhere was a chore. Hence, such a fear. Besides, this was a long foreign trip on her own.

The overcrowded entrance at the airport terminal defied the woman's idea of the growth of roots during the pandemic. Almost everyone was a migrant worker, the rest, their relatives who emptied the villages to come and bid them farewell.

"What ceremonious sendoffs!" she thought as she pushed her way through the crowd and into the terminal. "Was it because of the uncertainty?"

Once the woman completed her immigration formalities and entered the waiting area, the old worries resurfaced. For one, there was a flight delay, and then her thousand-year-old book about Ibn Jubayr's pilgrimage through the Mediterranean from Andalusia to Arabia was not in her handbag. But for someone who was flying, what use was it to read descriptions of a thousand-year-old sea voyage?

"Hmm. There are many uses, even if indirectly." The woman was determined to silently respond to her husband's question as she scanned the migrant workers crowding the seats opposite her.

"Who doesn't know that the era of travelling by water is returning? The sea routes are opening up again for the immigrants after so long, though they may not be using Ibn Jubayr's Andalusian trip-era boats. Their transport of choice now is the rubber dinghy." Besides, earlier, the enemy used to be the storms at sea. Now there were the coastguards who used drones, unmanned submarines, radars, machines to decode radio frequencies, 360-degree cameras, night vision goggles, and so on.

But those sitting opposite the woman, boarding passes in hand, were not all going to cross the seas illegally in those rubber dinghies. How many were and how many were not? She began to look for a known face among those sitting in the chairs before her as she tried to figure out the answer to these questions.

The only migrant she knew from her childhood had been that man from her village who, backed by the government, had sold his property and made a pilgrimage into the mountains. Many years later, when her neighbors began venturing to foreign lands, the woman was displaced, having moved to the city to study. She did not return to the village after that to live. Now, when she visited, she could spot the shiny tin roofs of the colorful buildings by the stagnant ponds. And she heard the stories of overnight successes or complete losses or becoming lost forever, or returning as dead bodies.

2.

"Can you ever become successful unless you take risks?" Al-Amin remarked to the woman last winter during the pandemic as he erected rows in the potato fields. Al-Amin was a former laborer from Oman. He worked in the vegetable fields in the afternoon, and plied a *laguna*[1] during the morning hours. The woman thought, "People die for various reasons." In the village, she was awoken on most days by an announcement of a death. Then she heard the droplets of dew falling. The smoky blue light peeping through her curtains told her that it would soon be morning. Even if the sun was not visible, the rooster's crows signaled the day, draped in fog. At sudden intervals, someone broke through the drape and emerged on the village path. They walked, absorbed, and silently disappeared again into the velvety fog. The silence was broken by the sudden call of a kite. A crow or two would then flap their dew-drenched wings and fly from tree to tree. The woman loved this time of day. It was the hour of her morning walk, she told Al-Amin.

The village during the rest of the day, however, seemed more dangerous than the city. Something was always happening. The tarred road passed close by the village and was constantly prone to accidents since the lockdown was lifted. Most of the drivers knew only how to start and stop their engines. They did not even know when to press the brake. The CNGs and autorickshaws sped past. The trucks rumbled by with ear-splitting honks. When had this mad rush reached the villages?

"Otherwise, how would the country develop?" Al-Amin parked the *laguna* in front of the house and alighted with a grocery bag. "For example, I have driven a speedboat on the

Arabian Sea. It is just like a *laguna*. I started the engine and let it rip!"

Al-Amin was obsessed about Oman. He chanted the beloved name day and night. He dreamed at night that he returned to Dukum, Oman, where he cast his net from a speedboat and caught fish by the ton. The Oman Sea was filled equally with water and fish. Al-Amin handed the grocery bag to his son and then, fishing a mask out of his pocket, followed the woman to the empty paddy fields to sunbathe. He also needed some Vitamin D. As they chatted in the paddy field, he told the woman he wanted to go to Oman one more time. Not because he wanted to try his luck again, but to say one prayer at the mosque that the elder brother of his Bedouin master built in his name by the seashore. The elder brother loved the young master very much. Out for some fun, he died in a car accident just before his wedding. Taking him to the big hospital in Muscat did not help. Al-Amin cried inconsolably at his master's death. The elder master never forgot this. He called quite often and asked him to return: "You were my dear brother's servant, friend, everything. I restarted the business. I won't cheat you. You will be treated fairly."

The next afternoon, nephew Shafiullah joined Al-Amin in the fields. As Al-Amin tilled the earth in the onion patches, a jeans and t-shirt-clad Shafiullah stood nearby among the grass-soil-weeds. He deposited funds with the broker and was now awaiting his visa. Though he was here, his mind was elsewhere, in a trance. He did not talk much. Tilling the soil, Al-Amin spoke on his nephew's behalf, "My nephew is educated, so he won't have to catch fish in Oman. That is a job for fishermen. He will find some way through as soon as he lands – Oman-Iran-Turkey-Greece...."

Instantly, the woman saw a glint of the turquoise-blue Mediterranean lighting up Shafiullah's brown eyes.

He was likely to receive his visa soon, said Al-Amin. But there was no definite date of departure. When the broker summoned, he would have to scoot, even if it meant leaving in the middle of taking a shit.

3.

"They dirty the toilets a lot," commented the nephew who came to pick up the woman from the airport. They were riding the train now. "You won't be able to avoid these people on any flight that comes from *desh*[2]." He was referring to the migrant workers.

The woman's mind was blank. She felt as if she had arrived on a different planet. It was still day here, despite her sixteen-hour journey. Broad daylight. She felt confused. It was a relief, though, that she was able to reach it on time. Her nerves wanted some rest now, and the train was very comfortable. There was no sound, no rattling, no shaking. The woman's eyes threatened to shut, but the nephew had a lot to say or ask. It was so long since he met a relative from the homeland. Why hadn't Uncle come along? He heard that the man had retired last year. What then?

"It is a pain to get the visa." The woman wanted to cut her answer short. "It is difficult for citizens of a poor country like ours. Poor and Muslim." Then, because she was sleepy, she did not add that she was proven right just a few hours ago at the previous airport. Though she did not wear a hijab, she was brown-skinned. Before she could react to the security guard's fingers in her private parts, the buxom girl, using a different technique, was busy with another passenger.

The woman closed her eyes again. She was exhausted, but scenes from the last sixteen hours flashed before her eyes. There were dark clouds and incessant rain at the airport in her own country. From her side of the window, the runway looked like an ocean, and the airplanes were whales swimming around. The airplane would take off now. For a time, she saw several whales flying up into the cloudy sky.

They did not know the language, nor could they read – the woman remembered the migrant workers again – how did they find the departure gate? The thoughts ran through her mind as she went from one terminal to another on the walkway.

"It's even worse when they return home." The nephew returned to the topic of the migrant workers. "If the flight is supposed to land in the morning, the flight attendants won't serve tea or coffee so that passengers don't go collectively relieving themselves. But you can request some, except that it will be you who gets into trouble because by then the toilets would be flooded."

"Without the tea or coffee?"

"Without."

This time, the woman grew fully awake.

4.

Daytime in the village was pleasant for the woman, but the nights seemed unending. The winter nights were long and cold. She woke up and felt that she returned to her childhood. Perhaps it was the winter weather that caused one childhood scene to float weightlessly like cotton around the darkened room: the disappearing colors of the green onion leaves, the tomatoes in the aluminum vessel, scrubbed clean with ash, sitting on the earthen stove...

They would be separated from those houses fenced on three sides, like the chicks gathered under the bamboo coop. Why did she sneak away from the watchful elders and end up there? There were no restrictions on the stove area in the open compound. In the winter, it was quite attractive. Perhaps it was the gentle warmth, and the tranquil, meditative cooking with minimal ingredients. This was the only time, though. The rest of the time was spent in constant quarrels. When fights reached their height, bottoms would be bared, by men and women, to mock the enemy. Without any reason, children would swear and curse. When they were in a good mood, they would carry some puffed or crunchy rice in the folds of their clothing and set out on evening walks, bodies well-lubricated, as if dipped fully in a drum of oil. The Oman-returned Al-Amin was one of them.

Every village had young men like him, bringing in remittance for their country, improving the luster of the land. They were not stuck anywhere, always in flux. Some got lost and returned. Others never did.

5.

"Resentment against immigrants is escalating," the young nephew commented, as he placed bowls of hot soup on the table mats. He was laying out the table by himself. Another ceramic bowl was filled with a spicy salmon curry. He must have cooked this dish specifically for the woman. "The foundation of the right-wingers will be strengthened."

He went off to the kitchen to strain the starch from the rice, and the woman laid her head on the table. She dreamed that fish from the sea came ashore. Now, the foundation of the right-wingers would be strengthened. As she broke apart balls of the smoking hot rice, she glanced at the clock. It was past time for her medications, the ones she took before bed every night. But the sky through the window of

the nephew's suburban home was still a peacock-blue – the day had not died yet. So there was still time for her to take her medications – that is, if she did not care about the invisible timeline and abided by the visible sun-clock.

The next day, when she went out, the woman saw colorful posters on the windows of the stores and wine shops, hailing the right-wingers. There was some graffiti in the corners of the walls – unclear whether they were anti- or pro-migrant, satires, or agitations. She did not know the language, so she could not understand the oblique messages next to the artwork. She needed to return to the house to rest and get over the jet lag. That was the price one paid for long-distance air travel. What was the harm if she travelled more slowly?

In the twelfth century, it took the explorer Ibn Jubayr thirty days to travel from Granada to Alexandria. The return journey took longer. One moment the sea was as calm as a lake, and then how terrifying the next! Waves as high as mountains rose before one's eyes and threatened to crash down. Ibn Jubayr suffered the trials and came to Mecca, intending to perform Hajj. He returned after more than a year, facing the stormy ocean, rocking between life and death. There were times, too, when the worry and tension turned black hair into grey overnight. Lowering the sail from the mast, he waited for days for the east wind to blow. He could only resume his journey then.

Ibn Jubayr's ship was driven by an expert and experienced sailor from Genoa, known to guide ships on the crests of waves, weaving left and right to fight the storms. The ship was massive and self-sufficient, like a city, where food and fruits were bought and sold. But even so, it was tossed around in storms like a paper boat.

A calm morning followed the terrifying stormy night. And so the long journey ended one day. On 25 April 1185, Ibn Jubayr Andalusi arrived at Granada.

The woman closed the book and lay her head down on the pillow.

6.

The guest room and the living room were downstairs, beside the dining room. The woman had the entire downstairs apartment to herself. The foreign wife of the young man was separated from him for a while. Their two

children were with the mother. The house fell silent after dinner. It was then that she would find herself, even if briefly, as she sipped some herbal tea. It all fell apart when it was time to struggle to sleep. The woman eventually left her bed at dawn. She opened the door in the dining room and stepped out onto the balcony as the suburban neighborhood slept. Someone dropped off a basket of vegetables at the opposite neighbor's door and cycled away. She dragged a small carpet from the living room to the balcony to meditate.

"Spiritual crisis!" the nephew muttered under his breath, seeing the woman sitting still, eyes closed. He poured water into a glass and glanced askance at the balcony. He picked up the book on Ibn Jubayr from the table and held it up like a mirror, as though to understand whether the book was behind the woman's sleeplessness. He moved to the dining room door and examined the woman momentarily. He hoped today would be a good day for her. Then he tiptoed up the wooden staircase. It was a Sunday – he was much better off sleeping than thinking about these things.

She meditated until she heard the boiling water bubbling in the electric kettle and thought about her wanderings over the last week: the stone fort from the middle ages, the war museum, memorials, lakes, mountains ... and so much more, even though she met an old friend or a forgotten relative almost every day and, at the end of the day, she sat at a riverside café in the twinkling evening lights, sipping a drink in the candlelight, and listening to the occasional deep sighs of the river. But the ocean was calling her. Was it the dark waters of the stormy nights that Ibn Jubayr went through or the turquoise-blue seas? She saw the sparkle of these turquoise waters in the infinite look in Al-Amin's nephew, Shafiullah's, eyes. It had the strength to pull one irresistibly like a thousand watts of electricity.

She knew that travelling abroad was a different experience for everyone, even if two people travelled on the same flight for some time. Still, that infinite, irresistible look seemed to guide her along.

7.

"Why do they come here to die and throw us into a crisis?!" Perhaps the guide meant what he said. She wondered if the crisis was spiritual, like the fear or the thoughts of death. If one witnessed death often, there was no way to avoid thinking about it. In the blazing hot, lifeless days and crazy

party nights on the island, fear or thoughts of death seemed inappropriate, a pain. Anyone with weak nerves could be tempted to commit suicide. The woman was a little worried about this herself.

And yet the island was as beautiful as a postcard. It was just a two-hour ride on the ferry from the mainland. When she had arrived here, the breeze was still cool, the sun's heat tolerable. Not far from the ferry station was the parking lot at the end of a row of palm trees. She took off her sunglasses to take a picture with an abandoned windmill in the background. At that moment, she was reminded fleetingly of Cervantes' memorable work, *Don Quixote*.

A heavily-tattooed porter escorted the woman with her luggage to her hotel room. The sun beat down outdoors with the dry Mediterranean heat, with the fiery wind. But the room was cool. The dome-roofed traditional stone house had small windows. The style proudly proclaimed its Arabian heritage. But there was no glory, only regrets, when, the next day, one had to hear tales of countless boat wrecks with drowned migrants.

As the woman trod over the dead grass and walked past the cactus groves in the late afternoon to take the stony path to the beach, she thought what a waste of time it was to sit in the hotel all day. If one wanted to avoid the heat of the sun or the tourists, one could sit immersed in the turquoise waters of the embayment. The high cliffs must give some shade all day. She was in a hurry to catch the sunset, so she bypassed the abandoned jetty and quickly made her way over the dry sand to the beach. But she must have glanced briefly at the jetty through the viewfinder of her camera as she paused on the sandy path to take a panoramic photo of the endless ocean. There, against the backdrop of a sky ornamented by the setting sun and pinkish waters, she saw the silhouette of someone sitting bent over, elbows on knees and head held in the hands. The person was not enjoying the sunset, but staring at the water.

She went out early the next morning, camera in hand, to the abandoned jetty and saw the same scene. The real person had emerged by now from the shadow figure. He was a young Arab-African migrant. They arrived on the island on the same tourist ferry. The young man did not smile when the woman greeted him. He merely nodded, but allowed her to take his picture. He spoke when she drew near, even though his bowed eyes were focused on the huge waves of the sea.

No one, not even the boatman, knew that the wooden fishing boat had a hole. But the smugglers did. That was the first time the young man was on the ocean with his friend. They talked about their families and football to drive away their fears as they sat in that leaking boat. The friend did not know how to swim. When the boat started to sink, he jumped into the ocean. He caught a lifebuoy thrown by the rescue ship and floated to this jetty. Three years later, he returned to it from the other side of the Mediterranean. His friend was lost, but he reached his desired destination, and was now studying computer engineering at a renowned college. He was on summer break now.

"Those who survive after such a journey must know what death is!" thought the woman as she put the camera in her bag.

When she entered the hotel, the tattooed porter told her the story of the sinking ships. He also told her how close to the hotel the scrapyards for wrecked boats were. He explained the aesthetic significance of the arches by the sea, known as the Gateway to Europe, and gave her the address of a local artist's immigrant museum. That was where she met the guide.

The woman was stunned as she went around the immigrant museum. A ship, four years ago, was wrecked in a storm, and almost all three hundred and fifty passengers perished. All the items in the museum, such as shoes, photos, letters, containers of oil, life jackets, rucksacks, pieces of clothing, children's rubber toys, credit cards, the Quran, were collected from the beach after storms. The cross at the museum entrance, constructed out of the wood from a broken boat, stood like a sleepless sentry.

The Gateway to Europe by the sea was made of the same materials. The shoes here, though, were much larger and pointed towards the ocean like cannons. "We do not want them to come anymore," said the young guide, as he stood looking out at the turbulent waters. "Their coffins may be gone, but they still left their mark," he said, dejectedly.

Of course there would be marks. Could the memory of thousands of deaths be erased overnight? The memory of the dead bodies of different ages! Still, the woman thought the flesh-and-blood young man in front of her was more sensitive than the famous artwork. "Then? Do the migrants go back when they see the shoes at the arches?"

It was the first time the woman heard the young guide laugh. She heard him say, "No, no. When Frontex, the border guards, use their drones, the migrants retreat. They change their route or the face of the boat. They still come sometimes in fishing boats or fiber-glass boats under cover of darkness."

When the guide wanted to show her the mass grave of the migrants, she refused. She thought she should return to the book of Ibn Jubayr. The best thing would be if she could meet that Arab-African young man at the abandoned jetty again. She was determined to meet a live migrant who survived the crossing.

The jetty was empty. Had the young man gone back? But the return ferry to the mainland did not leave till evening. Had he put up at a hotel? Or gone into the sea? If she could not meet the young man again, her entire tour would be futile, and the story of the journey would remain incomplete. What would she speak of to Shafiullah when she returned – of sinking boats and mass graves and an exhibition of shoes? Or the story of the young Arab-African who survived such a journey, knew death, and the meaning of life?

8.

The woman waited at the airport for her return flight. She fished her phone out of her bag and called Al-Amin on Whatsapp. The call went through immediately. Even though the route changed, Shafiullah was in the game now, reported Al-Amin. His nephew was being cheated at every step, but he was not giving up. Last month, he was in a country called Libya, where you could be sold behind your back even as you walked down the street. Then came the long-awaited ocean crossing. Al-Amin said that before that moment, Shafiullah sent a video home. The video was shot inside a poorly-lit old building with closed doors and windows. So none of the faces in the room were fully visible. The camera was shaky too, at first. Then it became fixed on a colorless, blank wall. From beyond the camera came a voice, "We are putting you on a small boat. Are you going voluntarily, or is anyone forcing you to go?"

"No one is forcing us. By God's will, we are all choosing to cross the sea." The response seemed to erupt painfully from that blank wall through the howling wind. Shafiullah's voice was lost in the undulating chorus of cries.

There was a text message the next day – there was no boat by the sea when they arrived – only a large box. The trafficker's associates turned on their flashlights and opened the box. A rubber dinghy was pumped up like a gas balloon. The men were packed into it like sardines, and the dinghy set sail in the pitch-dark night. This was the start of their long-awaited ocean crossing.

The journey of no return! The woman bit back the words as she held the phone to her ear. On the other side, Al-Amin seemed to be shaken by a mild earthquake. It was obvious that he was searching for words. In a shaky voice, Al-Amin said, "My nephew's call came at one-thirty in the morning. He said, the sea is calm now, *Mamu*[3]! No problems now! I'm in the game. Trust in Allah." These were Shafiullah's last words.

"That means," said the woman to convince herself, "that Shafiullah has left the shores of Libya and is in the middle of the ocean. He must be riding in that rubber dinghy towards the Gateway to Europe."

[1] A cheap local public transport with three seats in the front and two rows of seats, facing each other, in the back with half-open sides.

[2] Home country

[3] Maternal uncle

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📖 FICTION, SHORT FICTION 💀 DEATH,
IMMIGRANTS, TRAVEL